The THIRTEENTH SPOON

PEMBERTON GINTHER

THE 13TH SPOON

GINTHER

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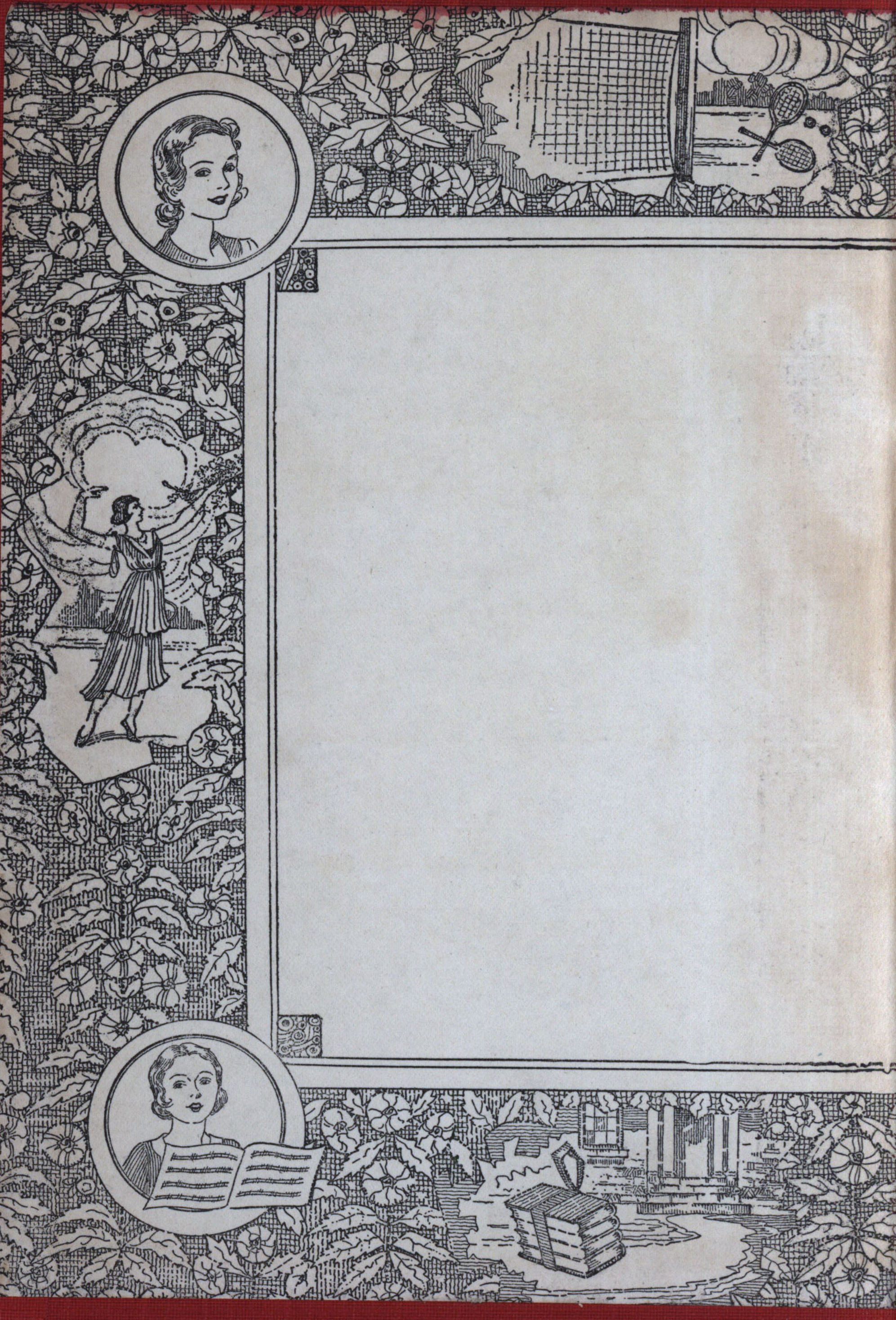

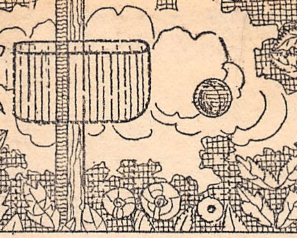

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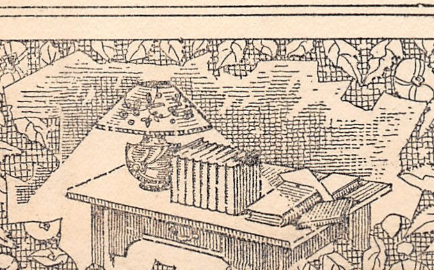

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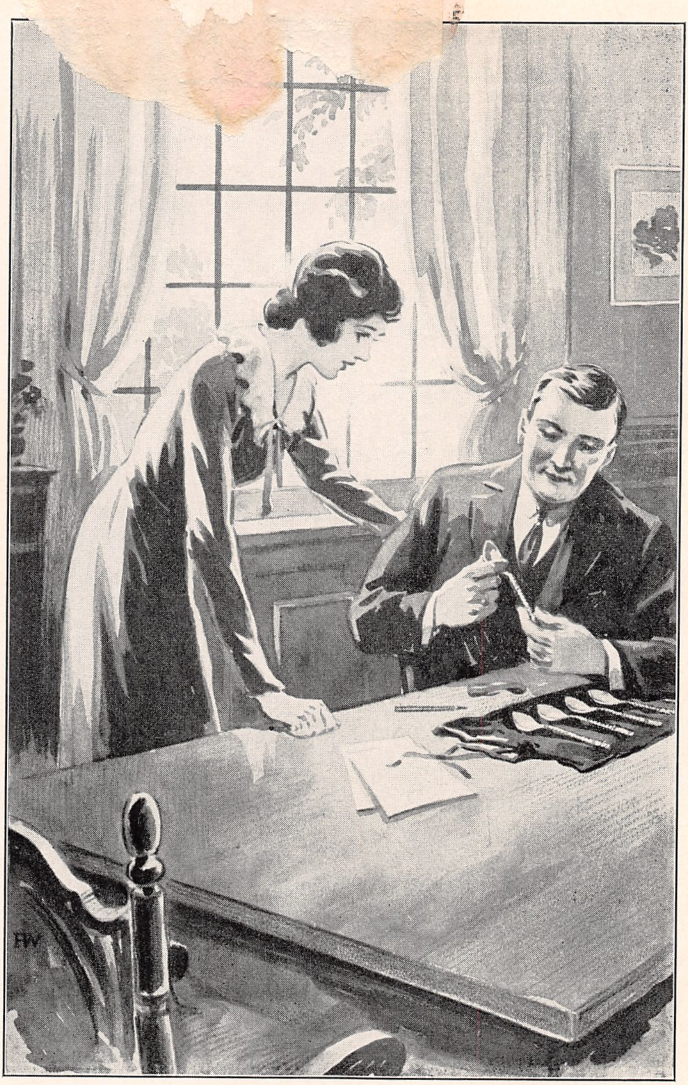


"THE THIRTEENTH SPOON!" HE MURMURED AS IF OVERCOME.

"The Thirteenth Spoon" (See page 43)

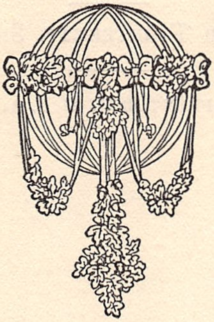
THE THIRTEENTH SPOON

A MYSTERY STORY FOR GIRLS

BY

PEMBERTON GINTHER

ILLUSTRATED



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MYSTERY STORIES FOR GIRLS

By PEMBERTON GINTHER

Large 12 mo. Cloth. Illustrated.

THE SECRET STAIR
THE JADE NECKLACE
THE THIRTEENTH SPOON

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The Thirteenth Spoon

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

To
MARIE JAMES KISTER

⁂

A pleasant companion
and a true friend

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THE
THIRTEENTH
SPOON

THE THIRTEENTH SPOON

CHAPTER I

ANTICIPATION

CAROL BRECK stepped carefully over the sill of the long French window. She was carrying all the glory of The Hermitage rose-garden between her two slim hands and the bowl was so full that a few drops of water spilled before she reached the green wicker table.

"Stupid!" she breathed, and set the dripping bowl on a discarded newspaper that lay on the sturdy footstool nearby. She pulled a duster from the drawer of the bench, wiped the moisture from the gleaming silver surface and then stood the roses on the wicker table among the books and magazines. One great half-opened bud raised its head above the others, its glowing heart a deep well of summer fragrance. She bent to draw in its beauty in one long inhalation. Then she straightened to look about her. "There's nothing more I can do," she thought. "Everything is ready."

Yes, it was ready; it was just right. The terrace, which occupied the east side of the house and ended at the angle made by the small tower, was certainly a pleasant place. The big awning had been lowered since noon and the brick floor had gathered a grateful coolness from the shade. Lounging chairs, smoking stands, the substantial table where the birthday supper was to be laid, and the empty space before the door where Mr. Hoyt's wheel-chair would come to rest; all were in order.

"I'm sorry Claire wouldn't stay. Even if it did bore her to tears, another girl would be a help. She says the Major is a perfect crab, and even Mrs. Biggs says he must have his tea served at once, 'on the dot.' He's been everywhere and seen everything, and he'll probably despise me for a numbskull." Her nose wrinkled in amusement. "I'd best keep quiet and speak only when I'm spoken to."

She glanced involuntarily out towards the front entrance gates. Such a heavenly afternoon. Light poured over the summer world, the smell of new-cropped grass was in the air, and a sense of growth, of teeming bud and fruit and leafage—life pushing up higher every moment; a heavenly afternoon. Beyond the terrace there was the flicker of sunshine through gnarled wisteria stems, splashes of gay color from flower-beds where bees hummed, the smooth level of turf, the massed branches of trees and, back of these, the yellow glint of a motor-truck as it toiled up the hilly by-road, trailing its cloud of yellow dust.

"The Major he wouldn't be a-comin' over that sheep-track. He's too perticilar about his car. He'll be in by the back way."

Alpheus Biggs, with his full lips puckered and a line on his high forehead, had come out of the farther door, carrying a tray stiffly before him in his muscular, work-worn hands. Four years of coöperation with his lady-like wife had not made him at home in these dainty tasks. He was much better at helping Mr. Hoyt about and in taking a hand with the farm work. Carol turned to watch him as he set the tray on the footstool, disregarding the crumpled newspaper, and shook out the table-cloth in the manner of a magician about to produce some miraculous rabbit from its folds.

"Six it will be; on the dot," he went on, smoothing the creases from the table-cloth as if he were soothing a fractious animal. "He likes to eat punctual, or why ask him for that hour, he says?"

He warmed to the interest in Carol's face. He liked this new secretary. She was one you could talk to. Not like the other one who was leaving, and a good job, too. This one was nice to everybody. "Yes, ma'am," he continued. "I know his ways, bein' I was his orderly for a whole year and lived in his house for another two, before he sent me over to take care of Mr. Hoyt; me and the missis. He'll be on the dot to-day, for he's bringin' the birthday present and he described it to me as a Whopper. No more. No less. A Whopper was what he called it."

Carol would have liked to ask questions, but she was too new to the place. A week was a short time. Major Henry Walton, her employer's friend and advisor, who lived over the crest of the hill in the small, beautiful Crow's Nest, had been spoken of so often that she felt a keen interest in his coming. Claire had said he was a crab, a bossy old thing and a pest; Biggs and his wife adored and feared him; Alan Hoyt had told her that he owed his success, small as it was, as a special feature writer to the Major, who had been hands and feet and brain, too, in the first dark days of his breakdown and who supplied many of the themes for his articles and occasionally some of the matter for them. In fact, Carol had understood that her own position here—secretary and general utility—had been instituted by the Major in an effort to help his stricken friend get a hold on life again. She stood, idly arranging the papers on the wicker table. Whatever sort of man he was, she meant to try to like the Major, in spite of Claire Burk's jeers.

Alpheus Biggs, with his mind turned inward on the Whopper, went on with the business of laying knives and forks in exact position on the cloth, filled with a growing excitement, forgetting caution, talking to himself. "Yes, indeed," he mumbled. "Yes, sir . . ."

"What did you say, Biggs?" Carol halted in the act of going indoors, caught by that mumble of unintelligible words.

Biggs pulled himself together and cleared his throat. "I was thinkin' about the Major's present, Miss Breck," he returned, and then in another voice, low, mysterious, eager, he added, "Did Mr. Alan bring out the spoons?"

His rapt looked puzzled her. His hollow tone alarmed her. Had he gone crazy? On the tray before his eyes were all the spoons; spoons for dessert, for coffee. She pointed to them. "There they are, Biggs," she began.

"Them?" He flung the word at her with withering scorn. "I was not a-speakin' of them spoons. The spoons I mentioned is rare old silver, worth their weight in ——"

"Bragging about the family plate, Biggsy?" cried a gay voice. "Pride is one of the deadly sins. You'd better not let the preacher hear you, and you only a month in the church!"

A girl, a shining creature, stood in the main doorway, poised like a player making an entrance on a stage, and she laughed at Biggs' swift change into stony silence, as he turned an offended back and, with eyes down and lips pursed, went on placing the tea-things.

"Never mind, Biggs, there are a lot of other nuts in the world," she said blithely. "Give my regards to the Ogre."

She stepped lightly across the terrace, all white and gold and laughing; gold hair and gold wrist-bag, white dress and hat and shoes, with the rose-petal of her face alight with enjoyment of Biggs' horror at her blasphemy. She was as beautiful and graceful as a Persian cat but her eyes were not so deep. She paused beside Carol to touch the great bud.

"You've got the right line on flowers, my child," she declared and stooped to take a quick breath of the perfume. "You ought to make good with some swell florist; window-dressers get big money." Then in a lower tone, she murmured hastily, "I'll be back early to-night. Let me in, will you? The small door of the garden; I've got the key to the other door at the far end. I'll do something for you some day," and she was gone without waiting an answer, taking her way across the back lawns towards the long lane leading to the road.

Biggs looked after her in speechless disdain, and then took up his tray, gathered the crumpled paper, and marched off. Carol could not help laughing, just a tiny silent ripple, at the stiff, indignant back. Then her smile faded as she thought, "She ought to have waited. I don't want to have to go creeping down like a burglar to let her in. She's going to be late. And she is coming in by the garden way because she won't have to pass Mr. Hoyt's windows. It's silly of her."

She heard the creak of the elevator ropes. Mr. Hoyt was coming down in the tiny elevator that linked study and library, sitting-room and bedroom, in the tower corner of the house that he occupied. It must be nearly six. She went in through the long French window, across the dining-room to the narrow hall that separated the front of the house from the back, and her face cleared as she went.

Claire had been patient with her, explaining the work and Mr. Hoyt's tastes and peculiarities with great good nature, and if she wanted to trail her best pumps through the midnight dew of the meadow and pasture path, it was her affair, not Carol's. Claire would only be here another week, or even less; until her invalid aunt in Charleston was ready for her. If Mr. Hoyt heard her coming in late, he would be lenient. He was awfully kind.

The moon face of the kitchen clock stared at her through the open kitchen door. Five forty-five.

"Fifteen minutes yet," she said aloud. "Everything is ready out on the terrace, Mrs. Biggs."

Mrs. Biggs looked up from the oven where she was testing the temperature. A bowl of batter—her famous pop-overs—stood waiting on the table. She was as earnest as any other seeker after high records.

"And everything is ready here, Miss Breck," she responded. "We can serve the repast on the exact stroke of six; or earlier, if necessary."

She was slim and pale, with an oval face that had brilliant lips and kindly grey eyes, and with a grand manner that no excitement could affect. She had been born that way. She loved fine things, though she might not understand some of them, and she adored the stalwart Alpheus, whom she endowed with all the virtues that a soldier and hero should have. She had admired Claire Burk until that lively young lady had laughed at her best hat, and since then she had been merely kind and aloof, not harboring anger. She was still a little reserved with this new young lady; people often seemed nicer than they turned out to be. She liked her so far, though, just as much or more than Alph did.

"This will be a happy birthday for Mr. Alan," she remarked as she moved about, light as a shadow. "A very happy birthday."

Carol had halted at the window and was looking out, beginning to think her own thoughts while she waited for the hour to strike. She wondered how her father and mother were getting on out there in Arizona and whether the climate was doing her father the good they had hoped. She asked absently, "You mean the Major's present?"

"Oh, no," replied Mrs. Biggs with some surprise. "I was referring to his health. He is immensely more robust. I have observed him rise to his feet occasionally. My husband insists I am mistaken, but I have seen . . ." She had a way of leaving the end of her statements trailing in the air which somehow made them more convincing.

Carol's mind came back to her surroundings, and she felt a glow of pleasure in Mrs. Biggs' words. Already she felt the strong admiration and respect that Alan Hoyt inspired in his friends and dependents, admiration for the courage with which he had faced his broken life, and respect for his proud silence, his conquest of pain.

"That is splendid," she said, warmly. "He would be able to farm in real earnest, if he got well."

Mrs. Biggs nodded as she moved the dishes about on the table with her delicate hands that no work could spoil. Carol, who always noticed hands, liked to watch the way her fingers touched the china. "Farming." She pronounced the word daintily. "His heart's desire. It is dirty work, very dirty. Strange work for a gentleman like him. But I notice that people always take to what's new to them."

"His experiments must take a good deal of money," Carol put in, thinking of her own small savings. It seemed impossible to keep her mind from centering on her own affairs in this interval of rest.

"Experiments, yes," Mrs. Biggs responded vaguely and said no more.

Carol let her eyes drift over the sunny prospect. This back room gave a limited view across the lawn to the wall of the enclosed garden, the stone tower, and the two big maples that guarded the entrance to the long lane; far away northward the small town lay like a cloud on the horizon, with its spires and steeples soft against the afternoon sky. She centered her gaze on the stone tower, squat, grim, and incongruous in the midst of the peaceful greenery.

"What queer ideas people get into their heads," she said, as much to herself as to Mrs. Biggs. "That tower . . . why in the world should anyone—even a soap-magnate—want to build that strange thing there beside the lovely old walled garden? And, even worse, to plaster the little tower on the corner of this nice old house."

Mrs. Biggs interrupted her, with unusual crispness. "Mr. Timson got the idea of those towers out of a book he used to read. Ideas from books are always valuable, I believe. They look nice to me. I knew him when he was poor and I used to run there on errands for Mother. That was before he fell sick and his wife started making her soap, to help out. He used to tell me about the book. There was a young lady named Amy Robsart, I remember, for I named my rabbit after her and it died."

"Was the book called Kenilworth?" queried Carol idly interested.

"That's the name." Mrs. Biggs was glad to find it again after long years. "There must have been a lot about towers in it. And I admire towers," she insisted. "They give style to a house. You don't see any houses like this with towers, two towers at that."

Carol saw that she had got on doubtful ground and she changed the subject. She had meant to put the question before.

"Why are those signs at all the entrances,—*No salesmen, book-agents, or other solicitors?* I asked Miss Burk but she said it was a joke."

"Joke?" echoed Mrs. Biggs in another tone. "Indeed, there is no joke about it. Mr. Alan is dead earnest about those signs. He won't let a strange man step foot on the place. And I don't blame him. Trouble enough he had."

Carol thought of the tramp who had come in when she was alone the first evening; should she tell Mrs. Biggs of him? He had made no trouble, though, had simply come and gone. "What trouble did he have?" she asked.

"He used to be kind to all that came," explained the other with grave eyes. "Any tramp who needed food was sure of help. Alpheus got tired of it sometimes. They were a dumb lot about farm work, most of them. Then, last winter there come young Mr. Parsons, with a letter telling how he'd been gassed and was an engineer and could write on the typewriter, and Mr. Alan took to him at once. He was sort of gentle and he knew how to do a lot of things. That water-system to the barn, and other things. Mr. Alan got to fair dote on him."

"What happened?" Carol inquired, thinking more comfortably that the tramp must have been one of the workers in the fields who had come again to ask for work.

"He went off sudden, and Mr. Alan's mother's ring with the big ruby went off, too. Mr. Alan wouldn't believe it at first. The Major, with his friend Mr. Henderson down at the Police Station, coaxed him into having the detectives on the job, though it went against his grain. He got to hate them and right enough, for they cost expensive and didn't get the ring back nor find any track of poor Mr. Parsons." She sighed and shook her head. "He told Miss Claire she couldn't bring any men here. The signs say, '*No salesmen, book-agents or other solicitors,*' but they mean *any* male person. I don't know what Mr. Alan wouldn't do, if he found a stranger stopping here . . ."

Alpheus came into the kitchen. "He's on the terrace, Miss Breck, and he says will you go out, please. He says he's seen the Major's car, but I doubt it's e-magination."

He glanced at the array of dishes that stood waiting the food to be put into them and he chuckled proudly. He seemed quite another person from the steady, every-day Alpheus. He wagged his head in a sort of vicarious triumph. "A Whopper, he says," he muttered.

Carol hurried away. She took pleasure in going quickly. To keep a man who was chained to a wheelchair waiting for anything seemed cruel; particularly such a kind and pleasant man.

Alan Hoyt looked up from the figures he was scribbling on the back of a long envelope, and smiled a singularly attractive smile. He was not young but he had the long lean figure of youth, or might have had if he could stand and walk like other men. His deep-set eyes were starry with kindness as he greeted her.

"Everything looks fine, Miss Breck," he said in a warm, low-toned voice. "I think I've never seen such a jolly looking supper table before. You've got the knack of—ah, there's the Major. I *did* see the car, after all."

He waited with a deepening of the light in his eyes and a sudden lift of the head, as if he were about to face a crisis more important than a birthday supper, and his long, sensitive fingers crumpled the envelope, thrusting it into a pocket where it bulged and showed a corner. "You'll like the Major," he said absently. "He was my father's best friend."

The trim car halted under the shady maples by the garage, and an erect figure in white got briskly out and came striding along the gravelled drive towards the terrace. Carol had ample time for all that could be seen, and she saw a man in immaculate linens with a tanned face that made his hair look whiter and a high nose with an eagle look about it; there were deep lines about his mouth and eyes and he had a determined chin. His white mustache was clipped short.

She got two little shocks of surprise; he was younger than she had expected, and he was carrying nothing, not a tiniest package, not even an envelope. He must have left the Whopper in the car.

CHAPTER II

THE MAJOR ARRIVES

THE MAJOR came up the two broad steps of the terrace with a quick light tread and extended a firm, sinewy, tanned hand. "Congratulations, my dear fellow!" he said heartily. "The happiest of birthdays to you. You're looking remarkably well." He did not even glance in Carol's direction.

Mr. Hoyt's face bloomed into positive radiance. "Never better in my—in these three years," he responded as warmly. "I'm really very fit." He made a sketchy motion as if to rise as he introduced them. "Keith, this is Miss Breck, whom Dr. MacComus kindly brought over a fortnight ago. She is staying until the first of November when our old friend Sanford will be back with us again, after his year in Spain—would you believe it will be a year?—time runs so swiftly—and then on the first Miss Breck will be back in Vassar, working to make up time. Her father and mother are in Arizona; a matter of her father's health."

The Major shook hands with a firm, friendly grasp, made a few comments on the healing qualities of the climate of Arizona and then dropped into the lounging chair opposite Mr. Hoyt, apparently oblivious of her. It was amazing how completely he could crumple down into the chair after his erect, unbendable carriage while upon his feet. His power of concentration was equally remarkable; when he ceased to look at a person, that person ceased to exist for him.

"And the other girl?" he asked Hoyt.

"Off for the afternoon," he was told. "She is waiting to hear from an old aunt, a wealthy woman, I believe, who is to take her to her home. About a week or so, I fancy."

"Um," remarked the Major and so disposed of Miss Claire Burk. He turned to more congenial matters. "I make my usual comment on your birthday supper, Alan," he remarked, crossing his legs and waving one foot in its white linen oxford. "You chose the right time. A month later and we should have been eaten up with flies."

There was a dancing light in Hoyt's starry eyes. "And as usual I reply that had I been born a month later, we should eat indoors. We live by adapting ourselves to circumstances, my dear Major."

The Major grunted, nodded absently to Alpheus who had appeared with his tray. "I've got a crow to pick with you, Alan Hoyt. Johnson says you've been driving yourself about the roads. It's too early to try that game, my boy."

"Johnson is exaggerating as usual," replied Hoyt, sobering. "I coasted down my own back lane this morning to his shop at the foot of the hill, where the car stopped of its own accord. There was no risk. A baby could have done it. Old Hallman was waiting there and took me in his car."

The Major looked unconvinced but said no more.

He focussed his attention on Alpheus and asked sharp questions about his work and his wife, gave him some advice and then, just as abruptly, switched back to Hoyt again.

"Have you seen that counterfeit case the Chicago police are up against?" he asked. "An international affair. Where's your paper? I've forgotten the names."

"I don't know where the paper is," Hoyt answered with a twinkle. "Tell us the story in your own words, the names don't matter." He turned to Carol. "The Major is quite a detective, Miss Breck. He keeps a scrap-book of crime, and is up on all the stunts that crooks indulge in. It's remarkable how . . ."

"Where's that paper, Alph?" demanded the Major testily. "I never can find a paper in this house, it seems," he added as Biggs disappeared.

Carol intervened. "I think I spoiled it by setting a wet bowl on it, and it was taken away. I am sorry ——"

He held up a finger. "That's right," he declared judicially. "That's as it should be, to confess when you're in the wrong. I like that. Alph will fetch it, I don't doubt. Yes, here he is with it. Second page . . . let's see . . . no, it's too messed up to read, but I have it at home. Thanks, Alph," and he handed the dilapidated sheet back to Biggs, quite content now that he had his wish.

He told them about the case as they sat at the table. A clever lot; some counterfeiters and expert craftsmen working together. Stole a standing cup of Charles the

Second period, worked it over a bit and sold it for a fabulous sum. The owner actually bought it back and if he hadn't been a real expert himself, he'd never have recognized it. He turned the case over to the police and they found it was all one gang, working together. A regular trail of counterfeit notes and doctored antiques. "But they're sharp; not a trace of them so far. Don't even know how many they are, nor where they come from."

"You might try your hand on the case," Hoyt suggested. "You have time heavy on your hands. Your friend at the Police Station ought to be glad of some help."

The Major helped himself to another pop-over. "Tell that wife of yours, Alpheus, that her cooking grows better and better. I'm glad I let her marry you."

Carol learned that this, too, was a regular joke of the Major's, who had been violently opposed to Alph's marriage until Alan Hoyt's breakdown, when he faced right about and insisted on an immediate wedding, much to Alph's delight, though the wedding meant that the newly made couple must live at The Hermitage instead of the Crow's Nest as Alph had hoped.

While she was listening to Hoyt's description of the wedding, the Major drummed on the table-cloth, absent and pondering. As soon as he could decently interrupt, he did.

"Do you remember old Stimson, Alan?"

Hoyt looked surprised. "Stimson? Of course. It's only two months since he came to live with you, and just three weeks ago this very day that we went out to Buckingham Meeting-house to bury him in the graveyard there. How could I forget him? I hardly knew him, but he was a kindly old man. A pity he had to pass on so soon. But you were good to him."

"He was saved much pain, at all events," the Major said, absently rolling a bit of pop-over in his fingers. "Don't say I was good to him. He paid his way, a hundred times over. If I had known ——" he broke off abruptly and began to butter the rest of his pop-over. "About that scrap-book of mine, Miss Breck. It isn't a fad, it's a serious study. It includes more than criminals and their crimes. It's a record of how the various crimes are punished. And judges, juries, lawyers and witnesses are as much part of it as are the crooks."

Alph was clearing away the hot plates and Carol felt, with a good deal of satisfaction, that the supper had been all it could have been wished. The chicken had been as well seasoned as the talk, and the mushrooms and potato-balls and salad as acceptable as were her own few words when speech was necessary. The Major, in fact, had complimented her on her helpful silence.

"Most girls chatter too much at the wrong time," he told her as he finished a discussion with Hoyt on a subject of which she knew nothing and had been glad to listen to. "That snip of a Bruce girl can't keep quiet for ten minutes. It's the empty can that makes the most noise. What are you working for?"

"To help pay for my next year at college," she answered readily, for his tone was kind. "Father has been ill and I won't take the money for ——"

"But three months or so here won't put you through a year at Vassar," he protested. "You ought to have some other source of income. What can you do?"

She spread out her hands, laughing. "Not so very much. That's why I need to go back; to be fit."

He turned to Hoyt again and she fell into thought as the dessert was served. She had to face the fact. She could not earn enough; if she did not find some way of earning more, she would have to give in and take the money that she had so grandly refused. And her father's convalescence, the days of healing idleness in Arizona, would be cut short. "I won't give in," she vowed. "I *will* find a way." Then she caught the tail of what the others had been discussing.

"I'm sunk," Hoyt was saying as he looked straight into his friend's eyes. "The experiments are all right but I have used too much capital in them. It's come to the point where I have to make a decision; give up farming or take to business. The Lowton Coal Company has offered me an agency."

The Major snorted. "Why coal?" he demanded. "Why not elephants or zebras? They are about as much in your line. You're no business man and you know it."

Hoyt opened his lips, closed them and then, unexpectedly, smiled. "I think you've helped me to decide. I think I shall stick to farming," and he pushed the corner of the envelope deeper in his pocket, so that it was quite out of sight—as if it were more important to him now, more worth taking care of. "Don't bring the coffee yet, Alph. We will go through with our annual ceremony, Major. No, do not look alarmed. Since I have chosen farming, there will be no need for further secrecy about our little exhibits."

"But, Alan," began the Major in alarm.

Hoyt raised a compelling hand. "The whole exhibit," he pronounced clearly. "Biggs knows where the boxes are."

As Alpheus, wreathed in satisfaction, went off on his quest, the Major gave Hoyt a searching look. It was plain that only Carol's presence kept him silent. He could not resist one shaft. "I bet you forgot the combination again," he muttered. "I don't believe you remember which bookcase your safe is hidden behind."

Hoyt laughed unabashed. "You win the first bet," he returned, lightly. "I had it on file but the paper was mislaid. Biggs remembered half of the combination and I got the rest, and then I jotted it down on the calendar. You're wrong about the bookcase, though—the copy of Marcus Aurelius is on the top shelf—I never forget that. Miss Breck, I hope this celebration won't bore you. It is very brief and it happens only once a year. Ah, here is Biggs. Now, Alph, the fan first."

Alpheus held two boxes in his hands. He gave the long, slim box into Hoyt's quick fingers as an acolyte gives the sacred book to the priest. His ruddy face was tense with anticipation. Carol wondered at his excitement.

Hoyt opened the wrappings and brought out a fan which he spread before them, delicate sticks, painted parchment, jewels, a work of art. A small card with typed names and dates dropped out as he did so, and he replaced it carefully.

"What a lovely thing!" cried Carol, impetuously.

"It ought to be, it's worth a fortune," grumbled the Major, who had not recovered from the shock of sharing their little celebration with a stranger.

Mr. Hoyt gave it into her hands, told her something of its history; of the king who reigned when it had fluttered at court, of his great-grandmother's youth in that court. "It is the only thing I have left now that my mother prized," he told her. "I shall never part with it, no matter what else I give up. Anything else . . ."

"Fiddlesticks," broke in the Major, suddenly good natured again. "Your mother would have been willing for me to buy it at any moment and put it with my lot of fans. She was a sensible woman. I'm only waiting for this fan, as you well know, Alan Hoyt, to put my collection on public view. Look at that fan, Miss Breck, a real Watteau, signed, and in his best manner. Look at the painting, the Venus and the shepherd Apollo; have you ever seen a fan like that?"

Carol, marvelling at the perfect state of preservation of the delicate, lace-like sticks and painted, pastoral scene, said frankly, "Never," but truth made her add, "But I don't know much about things like this."

The Major laughed and promised to instruct her when there was more time. "You come over some day and I'll show you all about fans," he said. "Perhaps by that time I'll have this one there, too."

"He always offers to buy this fan whenever he sees it," Hoyt told her. "It's lucky it is only on view once a year, or we'd be at sword's points all the time. By the way, a chap just last week told me there was another Watteau in this very design, only that the Venus had a blue robe instead of the red one. I wonder if there is anything in it."

"No such luck. I'd know of it if there were, and I'd buy it and laugh at your red-robed Venus," retorted the Major, gloating over the heirloom. "I did a good job here on this spot," fingering a tiny bouquet on the middle stick. "Look, Miss Breck, and see if you can find the break in the varnish."

She could find no trace of repairs on the smooth surface.

"Of course you can't," he triumphed. "Only a microscope could find it. A good job, if I do say it myself."

He gave it up reluctantly and yet Carol thought his interest and excitement grew instead of diminished as the fan was put in its box again and the next package was brought forward. He spoke sharply.

"Alan, I ask, I insist, that you delay opening that box until I have had my share in the celebration."

The urgency of the tone halted Hoyt's fingers on the clasp of the lid. He hesitated and then pushed the box from him. "With all the pleasure in life, Major," he responded, leaning back in his chair. "I know I am breaking an old custom in showing them before a fourth person, but I may as well tell you the need for secrecy is over. I have just made up my mind to sell the lot of them ——"

"Your Apostle spoons? Sell your—your ——" The Major bounced from his chair. "Are you crazy?"

Alpheus Biggs turned pale and stood staring. Though he had never had the joy of boasting openly of this cherished possession, the knowledge that he could have floored any man in the neighborhood with a statement of the value in that little bundle, had been a cud of joy to chew on through the year.

Carol saw Hoyt's hand go to his pocket where the letter lay. "I've had a lot of fun getting them together, those twelve spoons," he said quietly. "But it's beyond reason to hope to get the complete set. Only three complete sets have ever been found and how should I succeed when experts and connoisseurs fail? I shall stick to farming. Reality is better than dreams. A farm is . . ."

"Mere brown dirt," flashed the Major. "But if you must sell something, let me buy the fan. You know what I've offered for it."

Hoyt shook his head. "I'll sell you the spoons, my dear Major, but the fan remains with me until I die. Then it will be yours."

The Major fairly gritted his teeth. "I'll be choked if I'd take the spoons if they were given away. No use wasting words on *that*." He put his hand in a breast pocket. "Here's your birthday present, and no doubt it will be welcome. You'll be able to add a few hoes and rakes to your farm tools."

Hoyt did not touch the small parcel, but looked at the Major with shadows in his deep eyes. "Do you really care so much about it all?" he asked in a low tone.

The Major passed a hand over his heated face and slumped down in his chair. He looked suddenly tired and old. "The end comes always too soon," he said in a changed tone. "Get your farm, boy. God knows we get little enough of what we want in this merry world."

Then he leaned forward and flicked the small package into Hoyt's hands and, as the other still did not move, he almost shouted in his nervousness. "Open it. Open it! It's a joke now, and the joke's on me!"

Carol heard Alpheus Biggs' hissing whisper. He was talking to himself. "He sayed it was a Whopper . . . a Whopper . . . that dinky thing . . ."

CHAPTER III

PARTNERS

OVER in New York at that same moment, three people sat in a small, well-furnished, old-fashioned room in the Hotel Windham. On the sofa a paper suit-box lay open, showing a grey cloth suit, some striped socks and folded white stuff that looked like masculine underwear.

The girl, who was small and slight, was curled up in the only armchair in the room, while the two men stood, one by the curtained window that looked out on the air-shaft, and the other by the center-table.

The girl had been speaking and the young man by the table to whom she had addressed her remarks did not appear too well pleased. He made a negligent movement of his fine shoulders as if to cast off whatever burden her words had laid upon them.

"I'm not kicking about the girl, she's O. K.; but it's getting tiresome. I'm fed up on sitting pretty and playing tag back and forth over here and back there, with nothing doing. What are you up to, anyway? I ought to know what's going on."

"You seem to be tired of your job, Gilman." The girl bent her black head and looked at him with small, pale, greyish eyes. "What is it you're after?"

Her cold voice brought the blood to the handsome young man's forehead. "I thought I'd be off this job before now," he said doggedly. "You said it would be short and easy. Well, it's been easy enough, but I'm tired of twiddling my thumbs. I want a change." The sound of his own resonant voice seemed to give him heart. "I don't know what you two are up to. If you're letting me in for any rough stuff . . ."

"You'll quit us, then?" inquired the dark-haired man in a smooth sarcastic voice. "Congratulations, Gilman, on your nerve. I never suspected you of so much courage," and he touched the few silver hairs on either temple with a delicate finger, with a cat-like grace of movement. Both he and the girl spoke with a singular softness and clarity of tone, almost as if they were speaking a language not native to them.

"What do you mean, courage?" demanded Gilman, nettled. "Are you threatening *me?* You know I can quit you any time I choose. I've got enough against you two. That ten-spot you worked off on me last week . . . I don't know who you are, you and Norton, but I've a hunch that you aren't exactly Welfare Workers," he ended in weak bluster.

The dark-haired man and the girl exchanged glances. Some secret accord flowed between them, and the girl spoke in her careful, restrained speech.

"Don't be too great a fool, pretty boy. Who passed the note, Harry, you or me? You'll *say* that you didn't know it was a dud, but perhaps the police might not believe you. Who are you, pretty boy, to be talking of quitting us? A paid cavalier, a hired flatterer of pretty women." Her voice hardened till it cut like a knife and the thick fingers of her white hands clasped the chair-arm till the nails were colorless. "Don't try to double-cross me, Gilman, or it will be worse for you."

A spark lighted in Gilman's eye. He was not the sort to be scolded by a woman. He lit a cigarette and was gratified to see that his hand was steady. "All right, all right," he affected nonchalance. "I'm not quitting just yet. But why don't you give me this ocean run? I need a change. And I know France like my own back yard."

Another swift glance sped between Norton and the girl and again she was the mouthpiece. "It's too small a job for you," she told him sweetly. "Just some information that we can't get over any other way. Besides, we shall only want you here three or four days longer. You can stick it out, I suppose?"

"And then?" Gilman's face changed from quick relief to growing suspicion. "Am I to have anything more, or am I to be chucked flat?" He threw his cigarette into the tray and plunged in desperately. "See here, we may as well talk. This is as good a time as any. I thought you two were gamblers, . . . well, that's all right . . . there are always fools who like to lose money . . . but this stuff you are sending over, I'm not so green as to believe it's too small for me. Small? It can't be smaller than what I've been doing for a month. You let me in on it, or I'm through. I mean it, Miss Gladys Jordon, or Mary Martin, or whatever your real name may be. For you're no more a Princess than he," with a nod at the dark man, "is an Italian doctor. I've got my eyes open a bit and I shan't close them again, I warn you."

There was enough anger in his face and voice to impress the other two. The dark-haired man lighted a cigar and puffed in silence, waiting for the girl to make the reply. When she did not speak, he took his cigar from his lips and looked at the young man with a cool hard stare.

"On the other hand, do you think you've been fooling us?" he asked softly. "You are Richard C. Carter from the dear old southland, out in search of an easy job. Do you pretend that you don't know what you've been hired for? I thought you were thick, but . . . listen."

He sat down and began to talk, and the young man's face grew red and then white under the tan; his soft, carefully manicured hands opened and closed convulsively. When the elder man had finished he gathered himself together as if for a hard task.

"So that's what you've let me in for! A scout for your ——" he stopped himself and bit his lip. The other two waited, watching him, until he went on, more evenly. "Well, I've given you information, like the fool I am. Much good it will do you, though. There isn't anything you want down at the widow's house—it's all imitation stuff there—and as for the other place, there's only the fan that the girl told me about. You wouldn't bother with small stuff like that, from what you've just told me."

He looked at them each in turn and got no answer.

"Well, so it's good-bye," he said with an effort after nonchalance. "Or rather, *au revoir*. I've got a date for to-night, so I'll stroll on. I'm mum, absolutely, so long as you keep quiet and let me alone. You know where I am for the present. I'll be there for a week or two. I'll let you know where I go, *when* I go." He stuck on his hat with a flourish and went out.

They let him go and heard the thud of the elevator that carried him down to the street. After another full minute had passed the man rose.

"That's all right." He answered the look on the girl's face. "We can get him any time we need him. Get the camera and we'll run over to Larkers' and get the snap-shot for the passport. I hope your Little Boy Blue hasn't gone to sleep in the hay."

She unwound herself from the deep chair and disappeared into the adjoining room; it was evident there was no need for many words between them. He busied himself with the large paper box and when he had put the cover on and tied it, he went once again to the curtained window; it was a habit of his to keep watch even when it was not necessary. He nodded to the girl as she came back with a small camera tucked under her arm, and there was a crease between his eyes.

"If he should have a relapse, my dear," he began. "We'll have to use Gilman ——"

"Forget it," she smiled scornfully. "This lad Parsons, rechristened Perkins very conveniently by me, is awake for keeps. Gilman is off our list. This fellow is absolutely honest, dead in earnest about repaying my goodness to him in hauling him out from under the car and bringing him over with me. He'd go through anything for me."

"He's been sane enough since you brought him here, but these amnesia people aren't safe, for they may come to at any moment. How do you know he won't wake up and remember he is Frederick Parsons, late of the —th Engineers, A. E. F., just when he's out from under our eyes? I'm a bit uneasy."

She laughed aloud. "Luck, my dear, luck. It's never failed me yet. When I picked up that poor simp from under the wheels of my car, I was scared pink for fear the police might be on the job, but never a cop in sight, and even after I'd hauled him in and started off I couldn't see a soul who'd witnessed my little act. Luck, you see. When he came to, and didn't know who he was, I was glad I'd had the sense to slip his wallet, flat as it was, and some letters into my own bag. Luck again. When I called him Mr. Perkins, he answered like a shot. And he believes he was headed for the morgue and that I snatched him from the grave, and he is filled with the best brand of gratitude; the sort that lasts. Gosh, it's my second name, Luck!"

Her companion gave her a sharp glance. "You'd better stick to your proper line of talk, Elizabeth," he reminded her. "That last sentence has the tang of the low-brow in it."

She laughed and said no more, either on the way down to the street or in the machine.

The taxi stopped at the door of a house in a quiet respectable street well up in the 80's. A sedate middle-aged woman answered their ring. She did not seem surprised to see them but ushered them in without a word, and then disappeared upstairs, leaving them to find their way for themselves.

The girl knocked on the door of a room at the back of the house, a room that had been added beyond the original kitchen and which was accessible only through the hall by which they had come. She knocked twice and called in a gay voice, "Are you there, Perkins? It's Miss Jordon. May I come in?"

The door was thrown open at once and a young man in shabby overalls and jumper stood smiling on the threshold. He wore a small rough beard and had dark circles under his large brown eyes, and he looked weak as to body, but sound and strong as to mind. There was nothing blue about him to warrant the name they had given him when they spoke together, unless it were the stained, faded blue of his dilapidated overalls.

"I have brought a friend to-day," the girl said brightly. "Mr. Brown will take the photograph for your passport. See, he has brought the clothes I promised you. I hope they will fit, after all our measurements. If you will get into them . . ."

He took the box from the dark-haired Mr. Brown with a smile and an apology. "If you will be good enough to allow me," his voice was warm with pleasure. "I shall be ready in no time."

He disappeared behind a calico curtain that shut away half of the room and could be heard moving briskly, whistling a little under his breath. It was plain that he was entirely and sincerely happy in his belief that he was about to demonstrate his gratitude to his benefactor, Miss Jordon.

Cautious Mr. Brown listened a while and then nodded. “It appears,” he remarked in a casual conversational tone, “that there is going to be quite a slump in certain stocks. I should say that we’d better sell out all our Gilman stuff as soon as possible. After to-night ——”

Perkins thrust his head out of the calico curtain. “Beg pardon, but do you mind if I am a bit long? It’s going to take a little time to get rid of these whiskers.”

Brown and Miss Jordon cried out together. “You mustn’t shave!” she exclaimed. “And there isn’t time. You’ll have to keep your beard till later,” he said. “We’ve got to get the photo and be off.”

Perkins looked chagrined, but was obedient. He withdrew and went on with his preparations, even more hurriedly this time. Brown shook his head. “A close call,” he murmured with a grimace. “He’d never get by with his beard off.”

Miss Jordon whirled about to bring her lips near his ear. “Do you know him?” she asked.

“I have seen him before,” he returned in the same low tone. “No, I shan’t tell you where. But he is a safe man, a good man, a reliable messenger.” He laughed softly. “So Little Boy Blue went to sleep in the hay,” he ended less guardedly. But when she tried to question him further, he refused to speak.

Perkins came out of his retreat and he was beaming with satisfaction in his new outfit. “I couldn’t have done better if I'd bought them myself," he declared, settling the collar with careful fingers. "It certainly is a pleasure to have decent clothes on again." A shadow crossed his face but he shook it off. "I hope I'm going to be of real service to you, Mr. Brown, since you have been so generous. Miss Jordon suggested yesterday that I was to start very soon now. May I ask when?"

"Any day now, if all goes well," replied the dark-haired man. "I will have your ticket and passport, all correct, when I do come. And all you will have to do is to follow the directions, very simple directions indeed, as to the small parcel you are to take."

"So I understand," Perkins said eagerly. "You may rely on my absolute secrecy. When it is a matter of restoring an important paper to its rightful owner, there must be no loopholes."

Mr. Brown frowned thoughtfully at him over the camera as he set the time-stop. "You have a good memory, Perkins? You recall everything that has happened to you since your accident?"

"Since the accident, yes, absolutely," replied the young man earnestly. "Before that things are a bit misty in spots, but I can tell you every act and thought of mine since I have been here in this house. I've shown Miss Jordon my diary. Shall I turn more, or do you want full face? Take as long as you please, I'll keep perfectly still."

The camera clicked and he froze into position. Mr. Brown's eyes were on the face of the watch he held in his other hand. But Miss Jordon was not so occupied. She was looking at a time-table she had taken from her wrist-bag.

"He'll be on the train by this time, if he's got a date for to-night," she thought as her finger traced the line of figures across the printed sheet. "But he may be stalling us, the loafer." Which indicated that Miss Jordon's inner musings were not so smoothly conventional as her spoken word aimed to be.

She looked over at the two men, as the camera gave its final click, and her little cry of relief was genuine.

"That's finished, and now we must be rushing off, Perkins. Mr. Brown has an engagement; he's going to take his old aunt to the show. Be ready early to-morrow, about seven. We'll be here for you. . . . Good-bye . . . good-bye."

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

THEY all bent over the table as the wrappings were taken from the small object that had caused Alpheus Biggs so much speculation. For a moment three pairs of wide eyes were pinned upon it in absolute silence and then Hoyt's astonished voice broke the spell.

"The thirteenth spoon!" he murmured as if overcome. "*The thirteenth spoon!*"

Alpheus Biggs muttered unintelligible things to himself, and the Major's face shone. "Turn it over. Look at its marks," he cried. "The bird's head and the Lombardic letter W, 1494, the same year as the rest, and it's got the crowned leopard's head with the *lion passant* that was added in 1544; everything that your spoons have. It's the real thing. I've made sure."

Carol saw an old silver spoon with a deep, pear-shaped bowl and a short hexagonal handle ending in a quaintly carved little figure with a halo like a hat and a huge queer saw. Amazing that so small and unimportant a bit of silver should raise such emotions in these three men.

"The St. Simon Zelotes." Hoyt sat with the ancient spoon in his fingers, turning it about, examining its marks, scrutinizing the workmanship with wonder and delight. "By what miracle did you happen on it? I thought I had combed the markets bare——"

"Old Stimson," broke in the Major. "That was the secret he kept until he was going out. Amazing old chap, to have such a treasure and yet be almost a beggar. He had a superstition about it. Believed it would bring him bad luck if he parted with it. Strange old chap he was. You could have knocked me over when I found what he was giving me."

"And that was three weeks ago," exclaimed Hoyt. "How did you ever keep it so long? I'd have had to shout it on the housetops. It's a miracle, nothing less. Thirteen spoons, a complete set! You're a wonder, Major, a real wonder, to be able to hold in for three weeks."

"It's been a sore task," the Major admitted, beaming. "That's why I kept away from here for this last fortnight. *Now,* do you want to sell your spoons?"

The color dropped out of Hoyt's excited face. "Now," he replied in a lower tone, "now you have made it impossible to sell them."

There was an awkward silence for a moment and then he rallied. "We must have the whole set out now," he said, almost gayly. "Give us the bundle again, Alph. It'll be a great display. . . . Only three others like it in the world. . . . There," and he unrolled the soft bundle on the cloth in front of him. "Here is the St. John, St. Peter, St. James and all the rest, twelve of them. Aren't they beauties, Miss Breck?"

Carol bent forward to examine the array. Twelve ancient spoons of the same design and all with the same crudely carved figures on the top of their handles; the only variety being that each little figure under its hat-like halo carried some distinctive object, that told the initiated who they were intended to represent. She made out a few but not all.

"Which is Judas?" she asked. "He ought to be carrying a bag, I suppose."

"There never are any Judas spoons among these old ones, or in any other that I have ever heard of," replied Hoyt. "Not one of those reverent old chaps would have used the traitor spoon if any silversmith had been so base as to honor Judas by carving him on a spoon top."

"The St. Simon takes his place in this lot." The Major touched his gift. "In other sets it is any other local saint the maker chooses. Tell her, Alan, how you got them all together. It's worth hearing again." He was alight with enthusiasm and eager as a boy.

"I got the first spoon from an old fellow who was drinking himself to death," said Hoyt. "I didn't know its real value but I paid what was a fortune to him. After he was forgotten, I happened to discover its value—the Master spoon." He picked up the spoon and showed the figure with two fingers raised in benediction. "As this was the rarest, I decided to try for some others. It took years to get them. I got the last two from a friend in the French army who allowed me to buy them to save his old château from being sold. We never spoke of them, the Major and I, because the chance of finding bargains would have vanished, once the collectors got wind of it. That is why they have been kept hidden until now."

"They are fascinating," she murmured, examining each in turn. The longer she looked at them, the better she liked them. Each little crude Gothic figure had a character of its own. She sat absorbed, while the Major and Hoyt talked of sales and of bargains, of "writhen end" and "diamond point," London spoons, and west of England pricked-work, not once touching on the subject that lay so close to the surface—the sale that would have secured to Hoyt the farm-life that he had come to love with such devotion.

Alpheus could not resist. He edged closer and finally took up the new spoon. "It's a grand one," he muttered. "But, doggone, if I ever seen such a saw as that."

The Major's keen eyes caught the look on his rugged face and he blurted out impetuously, "If they were yours, Alph, would you be willing to part with them?"

Carol felt a wave of sympathy for Hoyt's white lips, but Biggs was wholly wrapped up in the St. Simon spoon. He shook his head. "It's too much to e-magine, sir," he replied. "I'd sooner lose a hand than see them go from us, now that we've got 'em all. Why, sir, Mr. Alan was a-tellin' me on'y last year that the whole lot would be worth more than twenty-five thousand, and goin' up every year."

The Major faced about to Hoyt again. "See here," he said abruptly. "Let me buy that farm you were speaking of—I don't know where it is—and give you a year or two . . ." he paused, checked by the look in his friend's eyes. "No, you are too infernally proud to let me have that satisfaction. Well, I wash my hands of the whole matter. You can sell coal or sell the spoons. I'm going. I forgot to say I'd have to cut away early. There's a fellow from Venezuela telegraphed he'd drop in on me to-night. I wish he had stayed there!"

Hoyt put a hand on his shoulder. "Forget about the farm," he said. "That will keep. Who is the chap? Do I know him?"

"No, he's a cousin to the big planter Manuelo. By Jove, I wish I could stave him off. I don't feel like playing the amiable host to-night. You've upset me, that's what you have, with your farms and your dashed coal-bins."

"Suppose I go over and help?" Hoyt said quietly. "Alph can have my over-night kit ready in five minutes." As the Major did not respond, he added in a lower tone, "Unless you don't want me."

That woke the Major up, as he had meant it should. He jumped up and grasped both Hoyt's hands in his own. "That's the best word you've ever spoken, Alan Hoyt. It will be great. Your first visit to me in all these years. Pack up, Alph, we must be moving soon."

Hoyt laughed at his eagerness. "You must put these valuables away first," he reminded him. "You know where they go. The bookcase in the corner, and you'll find the combination jotted down on the edge of the calendar on my desk as I said. Tear it off, will you, and throw it away. I've got it in my diary somewhere. Miss Breck, will you get your note-book?

I want to map out a bit of work for you for the morning."

Carol was back with her note-book when Mrs. Biggs came to exclaim with delight over the great event; the master's first over-night visit of a purely social character. "It isn't like going to town, where he was in a quiet room in a hotel with meals served private and all," she confided aside to Carol. "He's going among —what's that? The South American gentleman ain't coming for him, himself, is he, for mercy's sake!"

The Major dashed out from the house onto the terrace. "What car is that?" he demanded.

He was as much chagrined as Mrs. Biggs to find that it was merely young Mrs. O'Brian from the next farm but one, to say that her husband had got the fertilizer he spoke to Mr. Hoyt of last month and if Alph would come over after a bit, he'd help him load up whatever share was needed.

Hoyt hesitated a moment. "I think I said I'd take half the lot, Mrs. O'Brian," he said. "Tell Michael that Alph will be right over for it."

While they waited for Biggs to help Mr. Hoyt into the car which the Major had brought to the terrace steps, the Major, who had gotten out, came close to where Carol stood.

"When I heard that horn, I forgot to tear off that memorandum on the calendar," he confessed in a lowered voice. "Step up and get it for me, like a good girl."

She ran upstairs, quick as light, but returned at once. "There isn't a thing there," she told him. "To-day's calendar is torn off. Mr. Hoyt must have destroyed it himself and forgotten about it."

"Fine," he said with relief. "That's good. You can't be too sure about such things, though."

After their departure the place was very quiet. Mrs. Biggs had gone with Alpheus in the truck to make a little visit with Mrs. O'Brian while the two husbands were busy with the bags of phosphates, and Carol was alone.

She sat in the walled garden watching the sunshine drift across the grass, and her thoughts were a mixture of many things. She ought to be trying to think up ways of making more money. . . . The Watteau fan was a beauty, and what remarkable old spoons they were. . . . She had learned a lot this afternoon. . . . She must write to Alice to-night; it had been a week since she had written just a scrappy note to tell her that she had got the job of secretary to an awfully nice, rather elderly man, whose father had been dear old Dr. MacComus' friend for many years.

"I ought to go in and start now," she told herself, settling back on the comfortable bench. "It will take pages to tell her all about everything."

But she did not move; she sat watching the warm light flood upward, chased by the violet-footed evening shadows. First, the flower-beds dimmed and then the lower branches of the dogwood, until the golden light had fled to the highest tree-top and finally vanished silently, gloriously up and away into the radiant sunset sky. Eight o'clock. She heard the soft echoes of the big hall clock buzzing like a drowsy bee.

She jumped up and made her way out of the garden, closed the small gate and locked it. Already she was writing her letter to dear old Alice. She could see the address on the envelope in her own firm hand—Miss Alice Whelen, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie . . . and then she halted. She would not go indoors yet. The house seemed empty and rather too quiet to endure after all the bustle and stir of the afternoon.

"I'll walk about a bit. I need some exercise," she told herself, as an excuse. "Someone might come along, like the tramp the first day I was here when they were all busy in the lower barn. I'll walk about. It's too nice to go indoors."

The tramp stuck in her mind. He had been a mild person and yet tramps were tramps. She recalled the incident clearly.

She had been sitting in the small summer-house on the back lawn, writing the scrappy note to Alice and when she had looked up, there he was; not at all a terrifying person.

He was slim and exhausted and his eyes were like a beaten dog's eyes, and his hands were slender and fine, though very dirty at the moment. He took off his worn cap and spoke quietly, in a tired voice.

"There was someone I wanted to see," he said and stared at her. He seemed to struggle with some word that would not come.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, casting about for the quickest way to get rid of him.

He frowned, as if pondering her question. "I believe I am," he said, as if surprised. A strange sort of tramp indeed.

He moved aside to let her pass, and followed her to the shed-door, where he sank down on the bench and passed his hand across his eyes. "There is always milk in the ice-chest," he said.

How did he know that they had an ice-chest and not an electric refrigerator? She filled a cup rapidly and went out to him. He was sitting with his hand across his eyes as she had left him. If he had come to spy about, he had done his work before she had looked up from her writing-pad to see him standing before her.

He took the cup with thanks and drank. The milk apparently refreshed him for he moved with new vigor. "Good-bye, and many thanks for the kindness," he said, smiling at her with the honestest brown eyes that she had ever seen. "I think I must have lost my way. It was good luck to have chanced in here. I shall go on to the town more easily, now."

She had watched him down the long lane until he had turned into the hollow and later she had seen him come out on the distant pike, a mere speck of a man going steadily in the direction of the town whose spires and steeples lay on the horizon.

She had again forgotten him when Claire Burk came in with lively tales of the movie she had seen in the city that afternoon, and when she did remember him a day or so later, it had not seemed worth while to explain her forgetfulness.

She went out in the garden again thinking about the incident, and came in as the sun was setting. The tower looked like an ancient fighting tower, with its window-slits and its crenellated top. The last ray of sunshine lingered on the upper stones, as if beckoning Carol to mount up with it for a last look at the fleeting day.

The door was open. It had been nailed up until now, but Biggs had been busy here this morning and there were new hinges and a new iron hasp on the green-painted little door. They were going to store the fertilizer here, no doubt.

Inside it was too dim at the first moment for her to see clearly and then she made out empty stone walls with a stone stair winding upon them to a platform just beneath the roof; nothing but that, and, when she had climbed to the platform, a wooden chair without a back. She could not budge the trap-door to the roof, so she had to content herself with trying each window-slit as she slowly came down the stair. The first one was disappointing. "Nothing but trees," she said, as she peered out into the dense foliage of the maples by the back entrance. "Not much of a view here."

The sill was deep in dust and she left the mark of one hand where she leaned upon the wide stone ledge in her effort to get a wider view. She dusted her fingers on her handkerchief, and was more cautious when she reached the second window; she did not touch the sill. The second window-slit was not much better, for it faced the big oaks of the garden and the branches screened whatever might have been seen of countryside or sky. The last one was the one facing the house.

"This is better," she thought, as she craned to get a glimpse through the swaying festoons of linden twigs that flanked the third opening.

Mr. Hoyt's rooms, both on the first floor and tower, were at first invisible but as the breeze died and the branches drooped into place, she had a brief sight of the back of the house through a small clearly-marked opening in the foliage. She saw the smaller tower, the middle balcony and her own balcony, all in a moment, and then the wind stirred the leaves again and the vista was closed.

"It's odd," she thought idly, as she turned from the embrasure. "That hole is like a little frame to a picture, so neat and clear. I wonder how it happened to be so square and trim. It looks as if it were cut out."

As she took out her handkerchief again, she paused in the act of rubbing her fingers upon it, for they were not dusty in spite of having rested on the window-sill while she peeped through the tiny opening. This third sill was quite clean. Not a cobweb nor speck of dust. Alpheus must have been cleaning up here and been called away before he finished the rest of the window-slits.

She let the whole matter drift from her mind as she slowly descended the stair and went out into the soft summer air; she was thinking of the first week of November and how far it would find her prepared to carry on her college work. She walked still more slowly across the back lawn with her eyes upon the grass at her feet, hardly seeing the green herbage and yet seeing nothing else, and that was how she absently noted the little bunch of faded leaves that lay curled up by the foot of the linden nearest the house. A thick bunch of leaves. She stooped to pick it up and smooth the crumpled leaves. The stem looked as if it had been cut by a knife, for it was smooth, not broken nor torn as if by wind.

"That's strange, too," she thought absently. "It looks as if it would fit in the little square frame of leaves up there," and she glanced back to the sweeping branches that flanked the tower wall. "I wonder . . ."

She gave herself a little shake. "I'm getting to be a perfect goose. It's e-magination, as Alpheus Biggs would say. This twig was broken off by the wind last night. No one could reach the branch where it hung."

That was all right enough to proclaim aloud but it did not convince her inner doubts. It was certainly silly of her, yet she could not rid herself of the shivery feeling that someone had cut the peep-hole in the linden-tree. She became annoyed with herself. "How Alice would laugh if she heard me making up mysteries in this silly way," she said as she went towards the house. "I suppose I'll be thinking I am seeing ghosts next."

CHAPTER V

GHOSTS

"I SUPPOSE I ought to have spoken about him before but I really forgot, when there was any opportunity," said Carol.

She told Mrs. Biggs about the tramp as she walked towards the garden with her. Mrs. Biggs had promised Mrs. O'Brian some hardy phlox that she was thinning out and she carried a basket and trowel. The sunset glow made her look pink and young.

"I guess he was one of them that Alpheus had hoeing potatoes last year. Most of them didn't last long at it," and she laughed her rare laugh. "Most of them learned the path to the back road pretty quick. We had about a dozen of them in a month. It's a good job Mr. Alan wasn't here, though. You'd have had to send the poor soul off without the milk, and judging by your talk he needed it. Mr. Alan can't bear the sight of them, though."

Carol watched her deftly separating the new shoots of the phlox, one root from another. She knew she ought to go indoors and begin that letter she had promised Alice but the air was sweet and the sky was still full of light, and she lingered, talking of flowers and bulbs and other things. Mrs. Biggs was unusually talkative. She told Carol of her girlhood on the small farm below and how she had gone to the city as a helper in a cafeteria and boarded up-town with a woman from the church.

"And that was how I met my husband," she explained with rather a coquettish air. "Biggs had come home on a furlough and was seeing the town and had dropped in to call on the young man on the floor above. Mrs. Jenks called up from the kitchen just as he was coming down the stairs by my door. 'Alf!' she called. And he stopped dead. You see, my name is Alfreda and she and I were great friends. He and I both called down at the same time, 'Yes, what do you want?' And that was how we met. Pretty romantic, wasn't it?"

Carol agreed; almost anything can be romantic, if you look at it with the right eyes. She was about to ask if the tower had been closed all summer when the chug of the motor-truck came to her. Biggs was returning from the post-office with the last mail, and she hurried back to the house, with a cheerful, "Good-night," to Mrs. Biggs. She was always so hungry for letters and her mother's semi-weekly missive was due.

Biggs handed her a thin envelope. She knew the paper. Alice had got a big box of the sort she hated for her birthday last month and was using it up on her intimates. Alice liked thick creamy linen that made one's writing look well. Carol felt a little laughing thrill inside of her as she took the envelope and, with another good-night, this time to Alpheus, went indoors to enjoy it. It would be like talking with her chum; Alice's letters were like that.

She sat down at her desk and snapped on the light.

The afterglow outside dimmed into purple twilight at the window's square and night seemed to have been released by the click of her electric lamp. Alice's letter soon made her forget the purple twilight.

"dear pal of mine," it began. At this moment Alice was in the throes of modernity and spared herself all capital letters. It recounted activities of the summer session, the lack of red-blooded, two-fisted young men among the students taking the domestic science course just then assembled, told of the books that she, as assistant librarian, had been able to devour during hours of duty, and wound up with a real climax.

> "you must ask that wage oppressor mr hoyt to let you come up with the warrens next week. i have much of import to distill into your pearly ear aunt nell has given me her jewelry outfit anvil and all and we are going into the character jewelry business you and i the dean has been very human about it i have already seared my lily hands but made a brooch that no one would mistake for a gridiron kill the hoyt if you cant get away otherwise but come come come. i have arranged with the warrens for you to come and return with them
>
> no more till then alice
>
> p s pardon the two periods—the result of depraved training.
>
> p p s i have a feeling that this scheme will be a wow."

Carol could have shouted for joy. Here was the answer to the troublesome question that the Major had raised from its shallow grave this afternoon. Character jewelry would be a hit. The girls adored anything that was new and sounded brainy. Character Jewelry! It had a high and lofty sound; almost a religious sound.

She wondered if Mr. Hoyt would think her too brazen if she asked for the over-night trip so soon after coming to The Hermitage. She could promise to give all her other time, afternoons and evenings, too, if necessary. As she thought it over, she felt she simply must go.

"When Alice says she has a feeling about a thing, whatever it is, it generally turns out right," she thought with growing excitement. "Yes, I simply must go up and talk it over. We'll have to have the shop in our study and we can work after hours. . . ."

Nearly three hours later, she laid down the INC—KAB section of the Encyclopedia in which she had been looking up Jewelry, ancient and modern, with a sigh of satisfaction. She knew a lot more about the ancient and modern styles of such ornament than she had when Alice's letter had arrived. She had been at it steadily, and her head felt a little tired.

She put her lights out for the moment and went out on the iron balcony that clung to the sill of her one window, a long casement that gave on the same view as the kitchen window in the story below. The iron of the railing was cold to her touch and there was a fitful breeze that rose and sighed and died away again as light clouds passed over the moon. A speck of warm light glowed among the black-and-silver of the back lawn and the odor of a cigar wafted up to her. It was

Alpheus going the rounds to see that all was well before he turned in to his couch in the ante-room to the upstairs sitting-room.

She stood breathing in the scented July air, with the glamor of moonlight working upon her; all sorts of delicate, intangible hopes—gossamer webs of happiness—seemed to move and float in the moon-drenched air and she knew that the future, her future, would be all she dreamed it might be.

A flicker of faint light drew her eyes to the tower. The window-slit from which she had looked earlier in the day seemed to move like a firefly and then drop into darkness again. That side of the tower was in shadow and the firefly light was the more readily seen. She stared at the deep darkness until her eyes ached but no flash of faintest light came again.

"It's e-magination, as Biggs would say," she told herself.

Then she found she could make herself see just such flickers of firefly light over the moonlit fields or on the silvered wall of the garden, everywhere, save in the deep shadow of the stone tower. It was a trick of the eye, no doubt, and she winked and winked, and was rewarded by flashes of sparkling light, centered at last on the dark tower.

"I knew it was imagination," she said with satisfaction, and so disposed of the matter. She took one glance at the peaceful countryside sleeping under its silver blanket of light. Far away on the highway she could hear the *putt-putt* of a motorcycle; a State policeman on his patrol.

Half an hour later she went out on the little iron balcony to look for Claire. She heard voices at the end of the garden; a man's voice saying good-night, and Claire's light tones replying came up to her.

"She's been out with a man," Carol thought. "So that's how she sees so many shows! And she's brought him almost to the house. She *is* a snip. After all Mr. Hoyt's kindness to her!"

She went down through the silent house, glad that the owner was not at home to chance the discovery of Claire's indifference to his wishes. She slipped out into the sweet-smelling night and ran down the black-and-silver pathway to the garden door, unlocked it and flung it open, without a word.

Claire came through the doorway like a bright spirit in the ethereal light but did not break the silence until she was well beyond the wall. Then she flung back over her shoulder to Carol locking the gate a careless whisper. "Thanks a lot for waiting up. It was hot in town."

Carol followed with the key in her hand. "You needn't whisper," she remarked rather coolly. "Mr. Hoyt is out. He went over to spend the night with Major Walton."

"Really?" Claire halted and turned. "That must be a thrill for him. The Crow's Nest ought to be a terribly exciting place." She laughed. "Did the Ogre snap very hard? I see you're still able to sit up, so he couldn't have been so bad."

"Major Walton was rather nice to me," Carol retorted crisply. Then in a warmer tone, "I saw the

Watteau fan. Isn't it a beauty? Mr. Hoyt said you had seen it last spring when they photographed it."

"Looked like a dud to me," returned Claire indifferently. "Think of carting that relic to a dance! My word, it's lucky they put things like that away. Solitary confinement is none too good for it, I say."

She went to her room at the front of the house without even saying good-night. Carol was not eager for friendship with her but it seemed strange that two girls should live in the same house, in rooms separated only by a narrow hall, and not be more sociable. Claire's room had a door on the narrow hall as well as one opening on the wide front hall but Carol had never seen the door opposite her own open.

Carol stopped at the lighted doorway of the anteroom on the second floor to call in to Biggs who was reading by a night-light.

"Miss Claire is in," she told him. "And I locked the door after me."

The clock on her dresser showed one minute of twelve as she sat down at last to brush her hair. The clouds had swept across the face of the moon, and beyond her long window there was a brief darkness, and a stir as if elemental forces were gathering, with soft, low moans of rising wind.

She flung the hair down over her face as she brushed vigorously, thinking of Alice and the great scheme. The jewelry shop ought to be a success, if they could make enough articles in their spare time. She had heard Mrs. Snowden, the Gift Shoppe woman, say it took a long time to make a pendant or ring. The brush worked rapidly, in tune with her thoughts, and the soft dark fluff of hair made a shadowy curtain all about her head, as she stared absently, planning and hoping.

Her heart dropped a beat and her hands grew ice-cold. The brush went on automatically through an eternity of time. Ghosts? There in the mirror, seen dimly through the moving mass of hair, was a face!

An unknown, ghostly face. It peered into the room through the dark oblong of the window and then was gone.

She sat petrified in her hair-brushing for one long moment, and then with a sweep of the brush, flung back the hair and sprang up. "Claire!" she cried, though she knew it had not been Claire. And "Biggs," though she knew it had not been Biggs. But she must find some name to halt it somewhere outside there in the darkness.

She ran to the window, to the little balcony, bent over and peered down. The moon seemed to leap from behind the speeding clouds and everything was clear before her. The familiar scene lay serene in the magic midnight. Not a foot-fall, not a murmur. Trembling, she heard herself call again, more softly this time, "Biggs, are you there?"

After a pause his voice came from the middle balcony.

"Yessum. I'm here. I heard you, but I was sorta drowsy-like."

In the quick reaction that the comfortable sound of his voice wrought in her, she felt foolish. "Did—did

I tell you that Miss Claire had come in?" she managed to say in an almost normal voice.

"Yessum," he replied without comment, and turned to go in. She could see him very distinctly with his hair ruffled and his bath-robe and it made her feel still more foolish to have roused him for a mere fancy. "That's all right," he said and disappeared indoors to his post on the couch in the ante-room.

"I'm an idiot," she thought, ashamed. "What has got into me to-night? That silly bunch of leaves has stirred up a whole troop of nonsense. I'll go to bed and put an end to it."

She dropped the rest of her things where they might fall, got into her soft bed without finishing her hair, and in a few minutes was laughing at herself. The wind had dropped for a while and the moon shone. Drowsiness stole over her and her eyelids closed. She was dreaming that Alice and she were playing at shopkeeping under the great sycamore on the campus and Beefy Harford had ordered a silver-filigree breastplate and leg-guards for the basket-ball captain. . . .

She sat up, roused from the pleasant dream. Stealthy steps were padding past her door, soft, uneven steps like some great cat halting and creeping, out there beyond the door panel. All was dark and as she listened the sound of rain came in a sudden rush. The room, the house was a dark cavern where strange terrifying things moved, obscure and menacing.

She got out of bed somehow and found the door-knob. It stuck and then gave to her pressure. A flashlight crept along the main hall and an unfamiliar figure flung a huge, wavering shadow behind it.

"Mrs. Biggs!" she cried.

Mrs. Alpheus, in an eiderdown wrapper and with her hair in long spikey curlers, turned only half-way around. She was not too well pleased to be caught in her crimps and bare feet.

"I was pretty sure the rain was coming," she said with as much dignity as was consistent with bare toes and curling-pins. "I didn't want the new curtains to get wet. The front window is open," and she went on her way to close the sash, where the rain-drops were already splashing in on the sill. "I thought you said you locked your door of nights. I didn't hear you unlock it."

"I did lock it," replied Carol, rather dashed. "Yes, see, the key is in the lock. There is something wrong; it locks but doesn't hold."

Mrs. Biggs closed the window, wiped the sill with the cloth she had brought, and came back to the door in the small hall. Even her negligée could not prevent her from doing her duty. She took the key, locked the door, shook it.

"It is all right," she said. She kept her body bent a little so that her eiderdown robe covered her feet. "Must be the way you locked it. You *thought* you had locked it but . . ."

Carol had to give in. But after Mrs. Biggs had left, trailing her majesty, she went inside and tried the key. The door held. She shook it and it opened.

"There, Madame Biggs," she remarked to the empty air. "I was right and you were right. The lock is tricky. I'll show you in the morning."

She went to bed, laughing at herself and Mrs. Biggs, too. In the sluicing sound of the rain on the roof of the little iron balcony, there was a rhythm, soothing and steady.

She waked about two o'clock and listened to the drip of the rain-spout at the end of the house. Alpheus had remarked that it was clogged with grass and leaves of a sparrow's nest and that he must get it out before the next rain: evidently he had forgotten it. She opened her eyes a crack and saw the moonlight on the wall, like a happy spirit keeping watch. The sound of some distant motors on the highway came faintly through the night air.

The old house creaked and whispered cozily to itself, as old houses will, remembering many things that their owners have not seen, and the stars followed the moon across the sky, seeking the door of dawn.

CHAPTER VI

BUTTERFLY AND BEE

CLAIRE was down before her the next morning, the first time she had accomplished that feat. Mrs. Biggs at the head of the small table did not look as if she entirely enjoyed the novelty. Claire was apt to be a bit grumpy before ten A. M. and seldom tried to control her natural tendencies. This morning she was in good spirits.

"Had to get down to show my new negligée, while the Boss is away," she explained, as she spread out a rose satin wisp of a wrap. "Isn't it a peach? Only twenty-five dollars, too. I got a lot of other bargains. I'll show them to you after breakfast."

Carol looked with a twinge of envy at the dainty wrap. Her own things had been nice last year but they'd seen a lot of wear. College seems to be hard on clothes. Mrs. Biggs bent her head in frigid admiration.

"It looks very pretty," she conceded. "But it isn't very long. And the arms are bare. I should want more covering myself."

Claire chuckled at the little woman's determination not to admire her. She glanced across the room to the big mirror in the old-fashioned sideboard and felt content. "I do look nice, Biggsy," she purred. "Tell me I am a beauty! You know you think it."

Reluctantly, a softer expression stole over Mrs. Biggs' face, and she smiled a grudging smile. Who could have resisted? Claire in her rose-colored wrap, with her gold hair scrambled into a beaded Juliet cap, and her white feet thrust into gold-embroidered pink mules, was enough to soften the toughest heart. "You look like a movie person," she insisted. She would not be too weak.

"You must be going to have a hectic time at your aunt's," Carol said, as she took up her napkin and unfolded it. "You'll be the best dressed nurse in America, if your other things match this outfit. You're a perfect dream."

Claire tossed her head, elated. Any audience was better than none. "That's the truth you've spoken, my child," she said impetuously. "My own little motor, with a Peke to match the upholstery, the best hotels, Dinard, Monte Carlo . . ."

"But I thought your aunt was sickly, and lived quiet and refined in Charleston, South Carolina," broke in Mrs. Biggs scandalized. "You said you were going to nurse her."

"Well, she is an invalid, but she's got sporty tastes," affirmed Claire, and her blue eyes were wide and innocent. "She does live in Charleston, but we're going away. She just wrote me about it yesterday. That's why I splurged a bit. Want to see my togs, Biggsy? They'll turn your head, sure."

Claire laughed at her breezy tone. "You aren't wearing any crêpe for The Hermitage," she remarked as she helped herself to a piece of the delicious omelette. "You seem to be shouting anthems of joy at leaving us."

"You better believe I'm glad," and Claire's sea-blue eyes shone with truth. "This is a dead hole. The Boss would be all right if he had his legs, but that wheel-chair gives me the willies. And that old crab of a Major—you'll thank your stars when your term is up, believe me."

"I like him," Carol declared. "At least, you know that he means what he says, and that's a comfort."

Mrs. Biggs sat in elegant silence. Claire, after a glance at her, winked at Carol.

"Well, you'll be chock full of truth, if that's what you want. You'll get truth till it hurts," she mocked. "Maybe you like that. You're a strong critter. You've got queer kinks; slaving all summer to go to college all winter, to grub away among a lot of girls and hen teachers. I'd rather be a shipping clerk in a Five-and-Ten than be in a female lock-up like that. I bet it was that minister who put the notion in your head. He looked like a dried persimmon to me. I like them young, with their collars turned the other way and gold crosses on their vests. Style, that's what takes my eye."

Carol saw that Mrs. Biggs was about to break out and interposed.

"Where does your aunt live in Charleston? In the old part where there are those lovely old iron gateways and all that?"

Claire flung down her napkin and brushed the crumbs from her lap. "It's in the old part, yes. But sort of suburban. Have you ever been to Charleston?"

"No, but a couple of girls across the hall at college come from there and I've seen lots of photographs. It looks like a pleasant city."

"Oh, photographs," murmured Claire. "Well, a good many things can happen before November." Which struck Carol as meaningless. "Do come along and see my things," she cried and she jumped up. "Come along, *Madame.*"

Mrs. Biggs hesitated. To yield was to sacrifice her principles, yet she was only weak flesh and blood. She rose slowly and followed them at a distance. She stood in the doorway until Claire drew her in, and pushed her into a chair. "Rest your feet, Biggsy dear," she laughed. "You'll be apt to faint when you see the goods. The show is on, ladies!"

"That's the last," said Claire some half hour later, as she brought out a simple blue silk frock. "I just couldn't help buying them, they were so cheap. July is the time for bargains. I'll need them, of course, for my trip with—Aunt Julia. I'm about cleaned out but I'll have someone to foot the bills next week. La la! Think of it, not to have to slave any more." She danced a few steps. "Gee, I wish it was to-morrow."

Carol had not been in Claire's room before and now that the exhibition was over she looked about. It was a wide sunny room, well furnished in mahogany and pink. A much larger room than her own, but she liked her own better. This front part of the house had no balconies, and was overshadowed by the thick trees. She came back to the array on the bed.

"It looks like a trousseau," she commented, mischievously. "I believe your Aunt Julia is going to marry you off."

Claire bent over the bed, and took up a filmy primrose dance-frock. Her face was as red as a red peony and the corners of her mouth twitched. "I'll have to get these duds back into their boxes," she said in a flurried voice. "Give me that bunch of tissue-paper, will you? Isn't that the bell ringing, Mrs. Biggs? It sounds as if the Major were pushing the button."

Carol helped fold the lovely filmy dresses, while Claire chattered on about the latest silhouette with the flare skirt, the new kind of stockings and the type of hat that suited her best. She seemed in a high state of excitement and when Mrs. Biggs came toiling upstairs with a box many sizes too big for her, she burst into a merry laugh.

"Another one? Well, that *is* a joke. I haven't a cent. Or, at least, not enough to pay for it."

She rummaged through dresser and closet and finally brought out a wrist-bag that had five dollars in it; a trifle that she had somehow overlooked. Carol would not offer to supply her need; she had already loaned a dollar that had not been returned. Mrs. Biggs leaped into the breach. "I'll make it up, Miss Claire, and you can give it back."

"That's an angel," exclaimed Claire. "I'll have some money to-morrow. I'll strike for some. Aunt Julia is pretty generous."

Mrs. Biggs got out a clumsy clasp-purse and produced the necessary notes. She went off downstairs with the box with alacrity. "The fellow will be mad as hops if he has to wait any longer," she remarked cheerfully as she reached the stair.

Claire smoothed the contents of the dresser drawer and pushed it shut. "There," she said. "That will do pretty well for a while. I shan't get any new clothes until we get to Paris. What's the hurry? Better wait to see the last arrival. The last is always the best, you know."

A sudden impulse to tease made Carol disregard the matter of the latest purchase. She did halt in the doorway but only to ask, "Was that your Aunt Julia last night?"

Claire was puzzled. She was not particularly quick at understanding other people's thoughts. "Last night?" she repeated.

"I heard you saying good-night," explained Carol. "In the garden."

Claire's face cleared. "Oh, that," she said, lightly. "That was the State cop. He was on the Weston Road when I got off the bus, and he came with me as far as the wooden gate. He was a nice fellow. He stood down by the meadow fence and watched till I was safe inside the gate."

Carol remembered the *putt-putt* of the motorcycle. "He had a nice voice," she said.

Claire whirled about. "Mercy, how could you hear his voice? You must have a good imagination. He really had a voice like a saw. Won't you wait for the frock? Biggsy will be up in a twinkle. She's quite lit up over all this, poor soul."

"I ought to have been at work ages ago," Carol vowed. "I haven't put my room in order either," and she went determinedly away from the enchantment of chiffon and silk that she felt sure would be in the box that Mrs. Biggs would bring up again after she had paid for it.

In her own room putting away the things she had scattered about last night, her own clothes seemed less attractive than ever. It took all her strength of purpose to keep her content; it was only by remembering Alice's letter that she could be resigned to her condition. She felt better after she had made everything neat. She even began to feel sorry for Claire, who had spent all her money on clothes and had to rely on someone else for the other things that she would so surely need. Yes, it was better to have no new clothes,—bewitching though they were—than to be entirely dependent upon someone's else bounty.

She ran down to the study, her whole mind now on her note-book. When Mr. Hoyt came back at eleven he must find the work done. She hated to be late with anything.

She heard the telephone in the next room and had to call Claire who closed the door and talked in a low tone. "As if I would listen," thought Carol, amused.

Biggs brought in a sheaf of mail—mostly of the sign-on-the-dotted line sort—just as she was finishing, and the telephone rang again. This time it was Mr.

Hoyt with the farm instructions for the rest of the day. He would not be home until after dinner. "No, there is no more transcribing for you to-day," he told her. "Take the little car, if you want, and have a holiday."

A holiday was the last thing she wanted at this particular time. She wished he had given her enough work to keep her until midnight, so that she could prove her eagerness to do her utmost, before she asked for her premature vacation.

Biggs, however, was greatly exhilarated. "I bet they got over a lot of talk about the farms and it's settled for keeps," he said. "I'll give the roadster a wash-up, if you like. That there nickel is sure on the bum. Hasn't been rubbed for a month."

Claire had heard the tinkle of the 'phone and came in. "What's the glad news?" she asked, twisting a curl on her temple. "You look all lit up, Biggs."

"Sure I'm lit up," replied Alpheus, in a different tone than he had used to Carol. "Mr. Alan's goin' to make a day of it. He's woke up, I guess, and likes it. I'll have the car ready in about half an hour, Miss Breck. She'll need a bit of oil, too." He halted at the door to add, with zest, "That Smith fella got pinched last night right by our lane. Corporal Louie caught him passin' another car on the wrong side of the pike. About two o'clock it was, and he spent the night 'on the county,' as they say. I guess he'll behave for a whiles after this," and he withdrew chuckling.

Claire shrugged. "You must be the angel child, all right," she remarked carelessly. "The Boss hasn't let me loose in the neighborhood since he had to pay a fine for speeding past that nest of harpies at Edison, when I was green up here. How could I know that that bunch of gas-tanks was a Police Headquarters?"

"Don't you want to take a drive?" Carol invited. The thought of enjoying herself alone was not too attractive. "I'm going to see the country over towards the river."

"The country!" echoed Claire, rolling up her sea-blue eyes. "Can you beat that! What is there to see there that you can't see here? Trees and grass and cows; no, thank you. I'll go as far as the town with you, though. I have to go to Glenside to the dentist."

As Carol put the cover on the typewriter she noticed a small card face down on the floor by the bookcase under the window. She finished tidying the desk and then stooped to pick it up. It was the same card that she had noticed in the bottom of the fan box. The typed description of the fan, with dates and names. The Major must have dropped it when he was putting the boxes away in such a hurry.

"I'll stick it in the drawer till I get back," she thought, and shoved it under a pile of papers. Perhaps she had better tell the Major about it first; he might be annoyed if Mr. Hoyt learned of his lapse in care of the treasures. She took it out and carried it to her room, where she stowed it in her desk. "I'll be sure to see him soon," she thought. "I might go over there to see the fans."

It was nearly two o'clock when she reached Washington's Crossing. She had dropped Claire at the bus-stand and then explored Doylestown thoroughly, seen the Historical Building with its interesting library—she was always interested in libraries because of Alice—and had been through the Mercer house with its multi-colored tiles against a background of grey cement, its fascinating bits of old and new world craftsmanship, its enchanted air of withdrawal from all the every-day worries and puzzles that beset the common human being.

She had seen the sedate Court House Square that no amount of parked motors could make other than a picture of dreaming content. She had admired the brisk air of business about the center of town, the trim houses and lawns of the residential section, had asked for, and not found, the town library—that was still in the future, a phantom beckoning a few eager spirits. And then, through Point Pleasant and the riverside villages she had come to the historic Crossing. She was hungry but determined not to be spendthrift.

"I'll get waffles and coffee," she thought, as she parked the car across the road from the hotel. "Waffles are very filling."

She chose a small table at the far end of the room, the only vacant one by the windows, and sat looking out at the flowing river, the green smooth lawn, the cool shadows of the tall trees. There were some children down by the edge of the river, playing with pebbles, and their bright dresses made a spot of gay color among the green. Absorbed in the bright scene, she did not note who came or went. Gradually she became conscious of eyes upon her and brought her gaze back from the river.

Two tables away and almost screened by the people at the intervening table, was a young man. He was staring at her with a half smile on his lips. Sunburnt, handsome, with golden hair and regular features, dressed in extreme style, he plainly knew himself to be irresistible. Carol thought him conceited and impertinent, with his drooping lids and his half-smile. She knew his type. The girls at college called them various unflattering names.

She could not see the girl; the group of quietly dressed Friends at the table between was solid enough to obstruct the view of her. Fortunately her lunch came at this moment and she had occupation for her eyes. When she was not so occupied she watched the shimmering river flow serenely onward, past the bridge, past the widening shores.

A sound of chairs pushed back caught her unaware. She looked up and met the mocking eyes again. The couple had risen and the girl had started to go out between the two rows of tables, while the man, lingering to put the tip by the plate, bent in a shadow of a gallant bow, with the same little smile on his handsome lips.

"The *worm,*" she thought. "He's actually . . ."

The thought died in a shock of surprise at the sight of his companion. Claire! They went on out, not noticing her. Carol pondered the unexpected meeting. Claire had gone to the dentist. And here she was at

Washington's Crossing with a young man. Carol wondered if she should mention her presence to Claire.

She came to her decision as she drove in through the long back lane.

"I'll say nothing to her. If she wants to speak of her holiday, well and good. If not, there was nothing to say." A fib or two didn't lie heavy on Claire's conscience, that was plain.

On the rise of ground at the bend, she glanced back across the fields to the highway, visible for a brief moment. A car stood at the roadside and a girl in white was getting out. Claire coming home as usual by the hidden path.

She came through the garden gate with Mrs. Biggs who had been in there pruning the rose-bushes of unwanted sprouts. She did not avoid Carol.

"Funny we got back at the same time," she remarked as she fell into step. "Have a good time? I'm about dead." She did not mention the dentist; she merely let it be inferred, if Carol chose to take it that way.

"I went to Washington's Crossing." Carol told her. "The waitress told me I ought to have brought my bathing suit. The water looked fine."

Claire did not notice the clipped sentences. "Let's try it, if old Alan will let you off. I've got a silk jersey suit that's a knock-out."

Carol did not mean to say it. It popped out of its own accord. "I saw you there at luncheon," she said baldly.

"With Cousin Dick?" Claire was unruffled. "Yes, we ran over there while we talked business. He is going away soon, so I have to consult him while I can. Aunt Julia wants him to buy my tickets and all that."

"Is he going abroad with you and your aunt?" Carol felt she had to show some interest, though she didn't care much what Cousin Dick did.

"Far from it," exclaimed Claire with sparkling eyes. "Aunty is sort of a man-hater. He's too busy, anyway. He's got some big business in New York." She hesitated for a breath and then remarked airily, "No need to blow the trumpets about all this. A girl ought to be able to bring her relatives into the house where she lives and not have to meet them outside to talk business. It's not my fault. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

THE UNEXPECTED ALWAYS HAPPENS

MR. HOYT and the Major drove in just as the sun was setting behind the tower. The Major was in high spirits and Mr. Hoyt equally happy. The first visit had been an important occasion.

"Get us some coffee, Alph, and bring the box of cigars from the study. We'll stop here on the terrace a while, Miss Breck, if you can stand the company of two old gentlemen."

After Biggs had gone, the Major could hold in no longer. "We've made a truce, Miss Breck. We're both going in for farming. He's taken an option, it seems, on the Hallman place. He's going to buy it, and I'm going to get the Thompson place next to that. It will be all one farm in time, a superior sort of experimental station."

"In time, yes," added Hoyt with a smile. "And if he can stand the slow business of moiling in acres of brown dirt. By the way, Miss Breck, I've a letter I want to send off with the Major to-night. Would you mind getting your note-book? It won't be much work."

"I wish it were," she returned, quickly. "I wish you'd let me do a lot of work after hours, for I am going to ask a favor of you. I hope you won't think me too greedy. It's quite a big favor."

She did not tell him what the request was until after she had taken his dictation. Then she rose, as Alph brought in the coffee-tray. "I'll be back in a little while. I'd rather type the letter and have a cup of coffee afterwards. Miss Burk is in her room, shall I call her?"

She heard Mr. Hoyt's reluctant consent with an absent ear, and she watched Biggs placing cups and urn on the table without really seeing them. "I have just had a letter from my chum at college and she has a scheme to make more money for our next term. She wants me to come up next week. It will take almost two days, but I can make it up. I won't want any afternoons off. And I can work on Sundays, if you'd like."

"That's the talk," cried the Major, before Mr. Hoyt could speak. "I told you that girl was the right sort. She wasn't afraid to acknowledge that she'd spoiled the newspaper. Let her have all the time she needs for her trip, Alan. She won't impose on you like some other people I could mention."

Carol laughed and blushed but she liked the hearty words. It was pleasant, too, to hear Mr. Hoyt's warm approval of the trip. She felt that she had two real friends where she had looked for mere formal consideration. Claire had missed a lot in being so standoffish with the Major. He was a splendid person, just as Mr. Hoyt and the Biggs' believed.

Claire kept her own opinion, however, and she refused to come down. She was arranging some of her belongings in a smart new travelling trunk and was too well content with her work to leave it. "I've had all the coffee I want. I drank two cups after dinner," she declared. "Tell them I'm overcome with grief but I must deny myself the delight of coffee. Is that old crab going to stay all night? No? I thought perhaps they were seeing each other home and spending the night turn and turn about. I'd have to wear my new breakfast wrap if he stayed. E-magine his face! He'd probably pass out."

Carol couldn't help laughing but she grew sober as she typed the letter. It was not a long letter but it was an important one. It was in French and she had to take great care with it, for fear she might not spell correctly; she was a bit misty on French after two months of neglect. It was written to a certain M'sieu Dobrovsky in Vienna and told that wealthy and avid gentleman that there were, here in this vicinity, some Apostle spoons that might interest him. There was no mention of a complete set. Merely of some spoons with a certain date-letter, in the Lombard lettering. All of which spoons were positively genuine. M'sieu Dobrovsky was referred to Major Henry Walton, The Crow's Nest, Horsham, Penna., for further information.

She carried the finished letter back to the terrace, where it was read by both men before the Major stowed it away in an inner pocket to mail on his way home.

"You must come over to see my fans," he said, as he shook hands after the coffee had been disposed of.

"Come to-morrow. 'Strike while the iron's hot.' Did you know Scot wrote that? Easy to remember . . . hot . . . and Scot. Good-bye, Alan. Better go to bed early. You've been on the go, you know. That South American is an entertaining chap but we're not used to all-night conferences; not lately."

"I feel fit as ever," declared Mr. Hoyt as he whirled the wheels of his chair so as to see the Major going down the steps. "I'll be giving this chariot to Alph for kindling-wood pretty soon. Let me know when that Manuelo comes again. I've had a great time."

Alice's second letter came close on the heels of the first. It was lying on the table when Carol came down the next morning. It was even more modern, for it discarded spacing in spots and was hard to make out.

> "dear very dear fellow worker ive got another
> order thats a marvel and a newideafor you ill do
> the jewelry end and youcando the other thing
> ANTIQUES not therealstuff our own make
> try to find some classy article that we can make
> the deargirls swallow whole ornaments for
> roomorperson get busy al"

She read it twice and her spirits sank. "I haven't an idea in the world," she thought. "What could I make that the girls would want? It's beyond me. I wonder if Claire could suggest anything. No, she simply laughs at all college-girls and college-doings. I won't ask her. And there isn't anyone else. I'll write to

Mother and put a special on it, and perhaps she can send an answer before I go up to Poughkeepsie. She always has good ideas. I certainly do miss her. I wonder if Mr. Hoyt has sent the mail out yet."

Nothing came to her that day nor the next, but something unexpected happened the following afternoon.

The sun was sending long shadows across the garden as Carol went in through the wicket gate. It was cool and fragrant there and she breathed a sigh of relief. She had been busy all day, looking up statistics, hunting out references, revising her note-book. Mr. Hoyt was taking her at her word and allowing her to make up the time she would lose next week. She had not been able to get off for the hour that the visit to the Crow's Nest would take. She dropped into the nearest slatted bench and let her hands fall in her lap. It was good to feel the soft air on her warm face.

"I'm actually sleepy," she thought in some surprise. As a rule she could never close her eyes in the daytime.

She leaned her head back against the tall bench and let her thoughts drift. The idea that Alice demanded was as far from materializing as ever, though she had searched frantically during these two days. Plan after plan had popped its head up out of obscurity only to be sent packing. It looked as if she'd have to depend on her mother's letter reaching her before she left The Hermitage next Thursday.

The sound of footsteps on the gravel walk at the bottom of the garden roused her. A man's step. Probably Alpheus was putting some of the new fertilizer on the precious rose-bed. She sat up; then, as she could not get a view, she rose and went down to the bottom of the path.

The young man with the small golden mustache and drooping eyelids, the young man of the Washington's Crossing Hotel confronted her. He bowed and his smile flashed out in full glory.

"Pardon me. I was to meet Miss Burk at the gate. It was open and I came in. Can you tell me where I can find her?"

Carol's one idea was to get him out of the garden as soon as possible. "If you will wait on the bench down there," she began, when Claire came hurrying into the upper end of the enclosure.

"Dick!" she cried in surprise and halted, seeing them standing there together.

The young man greeted her with a gay wave of the hand. "Come and introduce us, Clarry," he said. "We are awfully keen to know each other, aren't we, Miss Breck?"

A wave of annoyance swept Carol. He was a worm, sure enough. "I am afraid I must go in, Mr. Carter," she said with cold emphasis on his name to show him that she knew who he was. "I think Mr. Hoyt may be coming out here." She did not think so at all; she merely wanted to remind Claire of her duty towards that generous gentleman.

Claire laughed. "I guess we'd better stroll down to the back gate, Dick," she remarked airily. "I want to ask about dear Aunty. How is she to-day? I hope you've heard from her . . ."

Carol made her escape with burning cheeks; the laughter that pursued her did not make her feel any more comfortable. She almost wished that Mr. Hoyt would come in upon them, or Alpheus Biggs; it would serve Claire right. She was awfully cheeky, bringing a man there in the afternoon, right under their noses.

Claire came after her in an incredibly short time. She caught up with her before she had gained the house. "Aunt Julia wants me to go in town again day after to-morrow, to see the lawyer. He's too busy to see me in the daytime, so I'll have to be out pretty late again. You'll be a darling and let me in, won't you? It will be the last time, you know."

There was a strange tang of wistfulness in her usually light tone, and it melted Carol's resentment. After all, Claire was doing no wrong. She must meet her cousin somewhere. "All right," she agreed. "Do try to be earlier this time, though."

It was only when she was in her own room, away from the glamor of Claire's lovely subdued face that unbelief sprang up again. "Aunt Julia, fiddlesticks," she thought, almost as the Major might have said it. "I don't believe she has any Aunt Julia. I believe she's going to elope with that precious *cousin* of hers."

Then she was ashamed of herself. "I'm getting to be a mean, suspicious thing. I'd better be hunting up some idea for our shop. . . . Oh, me! I'm too tired to think. I'll get a book and go out on the terrace and forget everything."

Major Walton was in his library, a spacious room whose walls were lined from floor to ceiling with old-fashioned bookcases in which shelves of books alternated with shelves of curios, picked up casually in his wanderings or sought with intense ardor, according to his whim. He received her with ceremonial courtesy; like many other arbitrary people, he had a gracious code of hospitality.

He had iced-tea and cakes waiting for her and insisted on breaking bread before he displayed his trophies. She enjoyed the half hour immensely, for he was a good talker and had much to speak of. The only drawback was that it left her scant time for the real purpose of her visit. She had promised to be back in an hour; Mrs. Biggs was to have the small car to go to Doylestown to the Nature Club with Mrs. Hallman. The meeting was an extra treat, as it was to be held at Font Hill and was a picnic supper, instead of the usual Monday afternoon meeting, and Mrs. Biggs as an invited guest could not afford to be late.

Her heart sank as she looked at the clock. "I am afraid I shall have to go," she said as she laid aside plate and glass. "It's been lovely to hear about all those out-of-the-way places, and I hope . . ."

"Nonsense," he interrupted. "You're not running off at this hour. There are a dozen things I want to show you beside the fans."

He gave in when he learned her reason. He was disappointed but approved her firmness. He insisted that she take a glance at the fans, however. "Just a glance in passing. I won't take any of them out of the case to-day. Here they are," and he led her to the far end of the room where a whole section was devoted to the exhibit.

"So many kinds of fans!" she exclaimed. "I never dreamed there could be so many shapes and colors!"

In the section behind the glass doors were primitive grass-fans of the jungle people, temple fans, painted and carved and jewelled fans; the whole history of the luxury of many nations, passed and passing. India, South America, France, China and the East had given their share. They were all labelled clearly with dates and sources. Most of them were genuine, though the Major explained that the two English parchment leaves were copies.

"And the *flabellum*—that one shaped like a flag, with little bells around the edge—that one is made up. I flatter myself I made a pretty good copy of an ancient temple fan. They used to carry them in the processions. Kept the flies off the chalice. St. Jerome is supposed to have been a maker of fans in the desert of Chalcis. That one is a copy of the *flabellum* from the Abbey of St. Filibert de Turnus, about 1502, as the label says. Pope Gregory VII used a fan to scatter evil spirits. . . ."

"They're marvellous!" she broke out impetuously, for an idea had flashed upon her. "Couldn't I make some? They're so—so—decorative. They'd look awfully well on the wall over a desk in a study."

He looked at her puzzled for an instant. "Why, yes, I fancy you could. It is not so hard." And then comprehension came. "You mean that you want to make copies of these temple fans to sell to the girls at Vassar?"

"Would you object? Would it be too hard? They could be made of paper. . . ."

"Quite easily. But why not try something the girls could use, if they wished? There are all sorts and kinds, you know, from the large fans the men used in Queen Elizabeth's time—Lord Coke carried one on his circuit, and the Earl of Manchester, too—to the tiny ones of Napoleon's period. Or you might make an album fan, such as the Princess Pan of China sent to the Emperor Chi'eng Si, with verses calling herself an autumn fan. That's where the Chinese name for a neglected wife came from. Or . . ."

Once again she interrupted him. Her time was so short. "The girls don't care much about carrying fans. They like odd things for their rooms, and '*flabellum*' sounds well, you know. They adore anything that has a good sound, like that."

He nodded, well pleased that she knew her own mind. "Educate them, by all means. But you can show off a bit with another style, too. I'll warrant not a girl of them knows that the sticks of the ordinary fan are called *brins* and the outer sticks *panache* by the initiated. And that the celebrated *Vernis Martin* is merely a fine varnish made by the coachmakers Martin Brothers. Well, well, I see you're in a fidget to be off. And quite right, too."

He went with her to the porch. "Come over some afternoon and I'll show you how to do the trick; I've got some of the stuff I used for my *flabellum* in the workshop. I've a mania for not throwing out material until I'm sure it can't be used by anyone."

"You're awfully kind," she said earnestly. "I don't know much about old things but I'd love to learn anything about everything." She joined in his laugh at her sweeping assertion. "One ought to know about antiques," she added, as she got into the car.

"Antiques!" he ground the word out with vigor. "Antiques is the most abused word in the language. Don't say *antiques* to me . . . with every roadside shouting that word at you and the factories working overtime to produce them. Go along with you now. You've spoiled my afternoon for me. Antiques, indeed! Sickening!"

She was sorry to leave him in that mood. Yet, as she drove along the roads, pushing faster as she saw the hands of the clock on the dash-board, she smiled to herself. A thought, pleasant as a little spring of cool water, was singing in her brain. "I've got the idea. I must make up one of those fans before I go up to college, though. I want to make Alice sit up."

As she turned in the long lane she shook her head. "And I got my great idea from the man whom Claire calls a crab and an ogre. Isn't it funny how it happens like that? You never know who's going to help you or hinder you. I'm going to tell Claire about it, just to show her."

Claire, however, was not at home. She had gone out early, Mrs. Biggs declared. "Dressed to the utmost. In her newest clothes. Almost too dressy for a lawyer's office, I should say."

Carol laughed at the expression on Mrs. Biggs' small face. "You look pretty fine, too," she remarked. "That blue and white frock makes you into a regular fashion-plate. You'll be elected a member of the Nature Club on the spot."

"Oh, my dear, they don't consider looks," Mrs. Biggs assured her seriously. "I could join, though, on my rose-bushes. There's no one has the roses I have, if I do say it myself. The Nature Club don't have any plans and specifications, anyway. You just join."

Carol waved farewell. "Dear little soul," she thought. "She *does* love big ideas. Plans and specifications! Well, I suppose I'm in for another long evening. Claire may be later than ever this time."

CHAPTER VIII

ENTIRELY ABOUT CLAIRE

CLAIRE looked about her with a swift, almost furtive glance. Dick had not shown up yet.

The hotel was humming with tea-time activity; people were hurrying in or going out, girls in chiffons clustered at the be-ribboned candy counter, men in business suits, carrying brief-cases pressed past the elegants with immaculate summer apparel, porters with luggage-bags waited at the elevator beside their clients; and there were shaded electric globes, the whisper of distant music, the odor of an hundred perfumes mingled with cigarette smoke and the chatter of voices, yet to her it was empty. Dick had not come.

She walked slowly to the row of gold-and-brocade chairs that stood ranged against the wall of the main corridor and sank down in one of the large armchairs. Her fingers clasped the carved arm of the chair with a tight grasp, as if to keep them from trembling. So much depended on this meeting.

She sat there for an hour. Then she beckoned a passing bell-boy. She watched him as he went through corridor and office and disappeared into the wide space that led to dining and luncheon rooms. His voice was thin and clear. "Mr. R. C. Carter. Mr. R. C.

Carter . . ." and then it faded into the sound of harps and violins and the murmur of people at table enjoying the hour.

He came back after a second trip. "Ain't got in yet," he reported. "Be in later, I guess." He had the philosophy of those who see crowds come and go daily. He took her small tip with a smile that showed a gap in his front teeth. She was a mighty pretty girl, if you asked him.

Claire waited another eternity and then, as the clock showed the hour of nine, she went into the Woman's Room. The telephone was on an onyx table, very public, but there were only two people in the room, a girl with her eyes glued on the wide doorway where she scanned all who passed in the corridor, and the maid. Claire did not see them. She was blind to all save the telephone and yet stared at its nickel base with unseeing eyes, as she held the receiver to her ear. It was a French telephone receiver and the murmur of her anxious voice was lost in its discreet depths.

A voice, indifferent and niggardly, "Mr. Carter? Gone away. South America, he said. Sailed on the—I forget the boat—this morning. No, no address. G'bye."

"Bad news, miss?"

The attendant touched her shoulder and brought her back to the lights and murmurs of the luxurious shell of life that she had cast off for a moment. She looked up with haggard eyes.

"Yes, it's bad news. My—my brother," and she choked. "Get me a glass of water, please," and she dropped her head in her hands. Only for a moment, though. For, as the woman murmured sympathy, she raised her head, and spoke in a firmer tone. "I shall be all right, now."

She drank the water, thanked the maid, leaned forward towards the mirror to straighten her hat, and powder her nose. She was quite self-possessed again.

"Better sit here a while, till you're sure you feel quite right," suggested the maid, in concern. She had seen a good deal in her position here.

Claire shook her head. "I am all right now," she repeated, and she rose. "Good-night."

She walked with a firm step to a chair in a more remote part of the corridor, in a sheltered nook behind a large palm. She knew the place well. As she looked about, memory stabbed her with a thousand knives; here Dick had planned their trip through the south of France, and they had laughed at the joke they were playing on the credulity of the man who was so generous to her. Dick had gone.

She repeated that to herself a number of times. Anger, disgust at her own gullibility, and a sharp fear as to what she was to do next, made her heart beat more quickly.

She had been stupid to buy those things; she ought to have waited; it was all too sudden, eloping with a man she had known only two weeks. She ought to have had more sense. A slow, burning shame at her own lack of foresight came to sting her into action. She ought to have known. She leaned back and closed her eyes. She hadn't cared much for him, had just been playing him on, so that she could get a trip abroad. Plenty of girls married for less than that.

"If I'd only thrown him down the other day, as I wanted to when I saw him goggling at Carol in the garden," she thought. "I knew he was a quitter then. Well, I'll have to make up some story. . . . But believe me if I ever lay eyes on him again . . ."

A courteous voice said gently, "Are you ill, Mademoiselle? I have concern for the whiteness of your face."

She opened her eyes to see a dark slender face bending towards her and eyes full of respectful interest. She did not speak.

"You seem ill. May I call a taxicab? I do not wish to make an intrusion, believe me."

She looked up at him with eyes suddenly full of tears. Pity from another brought a rush of self-pity and she wanted to weep aloud for the coldness of the world, and its malignity towards her, Claire Burk, who deserved so much better fate at its hands.

"I do feel ill," she replied in a low tone. "I have just had word that—that—my aunt is dead," she did not know where these words came from, and did not care. They sounded right, and there was truth in them, Aunt Julia was surely dead.

He did not make any further inquiry but took the fact as final. "May I not call a taxicab? You are weak and shaken. Pardon if I intrude."

She thought rapidly. She had no money even for a taxi to the Terminal. She must get away alone, take the trolley; she had just about enough spare pennies to carry her to Warrington. She must walk the rest of the way. She would be late in earnest. She got up and tried to speak quietly.

"You are very kind. I must go now. Thank you."

He bowed and moved aside to let her pass between him and the green palm. "I did not wish to intrude," he repeated. "I am a stranger. From South America. I know only two gentlemen in this region. I have a thousand regrets for breaking the custom of your country. Though I did not offer my car."

An hour or so later Carol was surprised to see a fine car drive in between the two big maples of the back entrance. Even in the dim moonlight she could see that it was both new and expensive.

"Who in the world?" she thought, and halted at the sound of Claire's voice, saying good-night to someone. She waited until Claire had reached the terrace where she sat among the cushions of the deep chair.

"Señor Manuelo!" she echoed with an astonished glance at the fast disappearing back-light that, like a red star, traced the dimness of the pale moonlight. "Where in the world did you meet him? I thought you were out with that cousin." A sound from Claire made her stop. "Are you crying?" she asked. "What has happened? Do tell me."

Claire stood still in the faint light of the old moon. "My—aunt," she murmured and burst out sobbing.

"Not dead?" cried Carol, coming to her. "Oh, poor dear, how dreadful for you! Come indoors, though. You must not stay out here. Let me help you . . . there. . . . I'll just stop a second to lock the door and then I'll help you upstairs. Come, you'll be better in your own room."

Claire yielded, but halted at the foot of the front stair. "Perhaps she hasn't left me anything," she wailed under her breath. "I know she hasn't. She never thought how hard it was to be poor."

"Oh, you won't have to think about that just now," Carol told her wondering a little at her words. Poor Claire, she was too upset to realize what she said. "Mr. Hoyt wouldn't let you leave while you are so miserable, you know that."

Claire groaned as she let herself be led up the broad stairs. "Will you see him in the morning and tell him about it? I just can't speak of it yet," she said, weakly.

Mr. Hoyt the next morning was full of compassion. He sent a kind message to Claire saying that she must stay until she was quite recovered from the shock.

"You mustn't think of being a trouble, either," Carol told her, as she arranged the breakfast tray she had carried upstairs. Her clear eyes shone with tenderness and she touched Claire's hand as it lay on the coverlet. "Try to eat, and keep well," she urged. "We are all so sorry for you."

Claire sat up and glanced at the dainty tray. She took the flower from the napkin and put it to her nose. "I don't know that I can eat anything, but I suppose I'll have to try," she said, listlessly. "I shan't get up till later. I feel sort of shaky."

"That's right." Carol's grey eyes showed approval.

Who could help approve so charming an invalid? Certainly not Carol, who was quickly won by beauty in any form. Claire, in her oldest negligée and with her bright hair mussed, still was lovely, though for once she seemed to have forgotten the fact.

Carol idled about the room, while Claire played with her muffin. It was plain she did not intend to eat it. She must be distracted from her grief and then made to eat. Food meant strength. Carol searched her mind for something that was not too lively, nor too sober. She found just the words.

"Wasn't it sweet of Mrs. Biggs to send you that rose? It's her very finest. And the Major 'phoned over before breakfast that he was going to bring Señor Manuelo to see her rose-beds, and to ask her about them; what varieties she thinks are best for a southern climate, and all that. She sent her love to you, too."

"Did she really?" Claire's cheeks flushed. "She's a darling old thing. Tell her I feel better already. After the Major and his friend have gone, I believe I'll go down to the garden and sit there a while. The air will do me good."

"It's a pity you aren't well enough to be there when the Señor comes," said Carol, kindly. "But, of course, you want to be left alone."

Claire said nothing; she thought, "He's coming to see me, that's sure. He's a lot better than Dick. I hate Dick. It makes me sick to hate anybody so hard. I won't think of him, the fake."

Carol was delighted with the effect of the simple gift. It was wonderful what an improvement there was in poor Claire. She felt a little remorse for having disbelieved in Aunt Julia. And for having considered Claire cold-hearted. She thought as she went downstairs with the empty tray, " Such a little thing, a rose, and from Mrs. Biggs, who she did not like much. And she's better, really. It shows that our health is influenced by our minds, as the doctors say. I must tell Mrs. Biggs."

She wrinkled her white brow in an afterthought. What had become of Cousin Dick? He ought to be some comfort at this time. Perhaps he was down in Charleston, attending to the sad duties. " He'll be back, though," she thought. " Claire isn't so desolate as she feels just at this minute. Things will be better for her later on."

She stopped to listen to some sounds above stairs. Claire was getting up. The bathroom door slammed in the way that only Claire closed it. She was certainly better.

CHAPTER IX

OTHER PEOPLE'S AFFAIRS

CAROL had an errand into the city the following day and took the afternoon train back. She had not gotten a return ticket, as she had been uncertain whether she would take the train or trolley. She had found, however, that she was in good time for the through train and, having a small bill to pay in Doylestown, had decided to go by the leisurely, roundabout way.

She waited in the station until the small crowd about the local windows had thinned somewhat and the impatient suburbanites had rushed away to the train-shed where the afternoon trains were pulling out. A man at the second window attracted her attention. She had thought she had seen him a little earlier in the afternoon, as she was passing the steamship office but she had not been quite sure. Now, as she went to get her ticket, she was sure of his identity. It was Claire's cousin Dick.

"It's queer for him to be here," she thought. "He was in the south. Or was it only my own idea that he had gone down there? I wonder if he's going out to see Claire?"

She wished she could attract his attention. She did not want to walk up and speak to him. She had to wait until he should see her of his own accord. There were three people ahead of her at the third window and four or five at the second window where he stood, so there was a good chance of him seeing her.

"He looks absent-minded and worried," she thought, and softened to him. Even a worm had its good points.

She could not know how worried Mr. Richard C. Carter was at that moment, nor could she guess how intently his mind was set upon his problem, for she had not been over the road he had travelled that afternoon.

He had come out of the steamship offices with a troubled brow, too occupied to note the passers-by. He had found the ticket and other charges too heavy for his light purse. He had to find some cheaper road of escape, some less expensive method of leaving the scene of his recent activities. He walked, touching his mustache absently, pondering the matter. He hated to have to think long on any subject. His was the butterfly type of mind, that loved to hover, to touch, to extract the honey and then be off.

"I ought to have had some put away," he reflected, and then shook his head. "It might have been some of their faked stuff. It's better as it is."

His philosophy did not help him solve his problem, however, and he sauntered along, hardly seeing the crowds about him. He had chosen Boston as his exit because there was a steamer sailing from that port on this very morning. He had not dared to try to slip out of New York under their very noses. They were too sharp, those two.

He suddenly had an inspiration. He would take the train northward. If he got to Canada he knew a fellow who would help him. Good old Don Marshall. "I haven't seen him since I left prep school but he asked me to come over and stop with him when I ran across him in the Ritz last year," he thought, with satisfaction. "He'll be glad to see me, I'll bet. He's been grubbing away on that big farm of his for a dog's age. No one like old friends, I say."

He retraced his steps, passed the steamship agency, and found the right window in the railway station. There were four or five people ahead of him and he stood, absorbed in his happy prospect.

"Don was always as straight as a string," he thought. "It'll be a rest to be with that sort again. I wish I'd stuck to it myself. This dodging about from one place to another is tough. I'm about fed up on it. If I get through this time, I'll go straight after this."

Carol, watching him, noted the change in his expression. She hoped that it meant he had some good news to impart to Claire, a legacy perhaps in the shape of money or the old house in the suburbs of Charleston. She moved forward as the person ahead of her left the window and her attention was centered for the moment on the business of buying her ticket, yet she was aware that a man was approaching Carter.

Claire's cousin, for his part, was lost in his happy dream. He felt a different man already. He was planning a splendid future in the wide northland, where he would be rich, respected, and popular beyond his fellows.

The woman in front of him dropped some notes from her handbag, and he picked them up and returned them to her with a graceful bow. Somehow the act made him feel better. When he got to Don's place, he'd ask for a job. A real man's job. . . .

"Pardon *me,*" said a low voice behind him. "May I see you a minute? Private business."

Carter turned and saw a small, pox-marked man in a palm-beach suit too large for him and wearing a sun-bleached leghorn hat. He understood. He left the line and walked a little aside. He wasn't going to give up too easily.

"You've come from Norton, I suppose," he said, as lightly as he could. "Well, that's all right. I'm just off on a bit of business for him myself. He gave me all the instructions. No need to ask how you are. You look like the real stuff."

"Yeah?" remarked the other unmoved. "That's nice. Come along and tell me all about it. I'm achin' fer news about home."

As the two moved away Carol heard these last words and they puzzled her greatly. She was more puzzled, as she thought them over on her way home. Should she tell Claire of the encounter, or wait until Carter himself showed up?

"I do wish I knew who that ugly little man was and why he wanted to know about her Aunt Julia," she thought. "Perhaps I'd better not mention it to

Claire, after all. It's not my affair, really. She'd think I had been trying to poke into her affairs, I suppose . . . well, I'll say nothing for a while. That will be best."

She felt a real tenderness towards Claire in these days of her bereavement, and she wished with great earnestness that she could do something to help her; but Claire held aloof in her sorrow as she had in her pleasures, and Carol could only show her sympathy by small acts of kindness and thoughtfulness.

A few afternoons later she thought of a plan to divert the mind of the afflicted girl, who had become silent and drooping, averse to any companionship and, on a few occasions, decidedly tart in rejecting Carol's kind offices.

"I'll take her over to the Picture Show at the river," she thought. "She may not care for the paintings but she'll like to go into the studios and have tea. It's not like a party or a concert; one can be as quiet and remote as one likes. Mr. Hoyt told me to take the car for the afternoon, so we can stay as long as we please. It will do her good. She stays in her room too much. She hasn't budged to-day."

When she reached Claire's room, however, she found the door closed and though she knocked, lightly at first and then more loudly, there was no response. It was plain that Claire was not in. She was disappointed, as one always is when good intentions are thwarted. If she could have seen Claire at that moment she might have had other feelings.

In the most exclusive hotel in the city, dressed in her most becoming new outfit, Claire smiled sadly on her companion, as she voiced her inmost feelings.

"I hate business from the bottom of my heart," said Claire. "I wish I'd never have to touch another typewriter."

"Ah, you are a true woman," said Señor Manuelo with warmth. "You should be the center of a home, the inspiration of a circle of admiration and respect."

Claire and the Señor sat in the shaded corner of the roof-garden where the palms screened them from the larger part of the room, and the music from the stringed orchestra came in a faint murmur like perfume. He held the menu in his hand.

"You must allow me to order," he said. "It is a great happiness to me that I should again meet you by chance in this strange city where I know no one. You must have been sent by my guardian angel."

Claire smiled back at him in a pensive way. She ought not be too lively when her aunt had died so short a time ago. She had known he would be glad to see her, but it had been quick work to skip down from The Hermitage in time. She had heard Major Walton say, just as he was leaving this morning, that the Señor had business in the city and would take in the Art Museum afterwards. Claire had never been to the Museum, and she had felt at once that she had missed an important part of her life.

"Please don't order much. I don't feel like eating," she murmured and she glanced into her little mirror with a sigh. "I know what it is to be lonely. Only it's different with a girl. And I'm terribly poor. If

I were rich as you are, perhaps I wouldn't feel so—so left out."

She had heard he was rich but she wanted to hear it from his own lips. She dropped her white lids and sighed again.

"Yes, I am what you call rich. And in my own country I have many friends," he said seriously. "Even here I might have people about me, if I chose. But, since I have seen you, no other person has interested me."

She looked up from under her golden lashes with a ghost of a smile. "What would your wife say to that?" she asked. "I don't like you when you say things like that."

He drew himself erect. "I have no wife," he returned with cold scorn for such an accusation. "I am not a man who would act such a part. You mistake me, Señorita."

It took him almost all of the luncheon hour to recover. Claire was alarmed.

"He's different," she thought. "He's a real gentleman. I've never seen any young fellow like him. Most of the real gentlemen are old birds. He's different. Dick? Why, Dick looks like a piker alongside of him."

She left his fine car at the foot of the meadow-path and walked through the grassy undulating level up to the back garden-door, which she unlocked with the key she had thoughtfully secured before leaving early in the afternoon. She was thinking deeply. The trend of her thought was the same and it broke out in speech as she met Carol on the terrace. She did not notice that Carol had herself just come in, nor that her greeting was slightly cooler than usual of late.

" I met Señor Manuelo," she said without preface. " He's a real gentleman. He's awfully touchy, but he's the real stuff. You can tell it just as soon as he speaks to you."

Carol was glad she had not told of her chance glimpse of Cousin Dick and his seedy companion, for she saw that Claire had lost something of her gloomy abstracted look; she now appeared thoughtful and a bit puzzled but not so unhappy as before. Carol thought, " She's begun to be interested in something outside of herself. If this Señor was going to stay a while, she might get really interested, but he is going away, she says, in a day or so and won't see her again. She'll be moping over her lost happiness again, poor thing. I'll have to do my best to get her to go out and forget her troubles."

Claire passed indoors without speaking and went directly to her room where she stayed until dinner time, while Carol was busy with her own affairs. She wrote a letter to her mother telling her all the items of daily life at The Hermitage that would interest her; she sorted out the papers in her desk and filled her ink well; she straightened out the few disorderly elements in her room. The sight of the flat pasteboard box in which lay the *flabellum* brought a happy curve to her lips. The fan was ready for exhibition now and it was a beauty, with its little bells and its rich colors. " I can hardly wait till Alice sees it," she thought, as she made ready to go down. "She really can't help liking it."

Claire looked up at her when she came into the dining-room and Mrs. Biggs shot an approving glance; Mr. Hoyt, as he wheeled himself to the table, commented on her bright looks.

"You are a pleasant object for eyes that have been occupied with prosaic stuff like agricultural reports," he said gayly. "I wish we could keep you here. I've a nephew who is coming over next year to take hold with me, and I believe if he had the chance to see you now, he might be able to persuade you to come back after you've finished at Vassar."

Carol laughed as she seated herself and shook out her napkin. "He must be a very nice young person, since you're so very sure he could do such quick work," she retorted. "Just one look and it would be done——"

"A nephew," echoed Claire, who was at once interested. "I never knew you had a nephew, Mr. Hoyt. Or are you making him up just to jolly her along? You've never mentioned him."

Hoyt's lips drew to a line, as he put his hand in his inner pocket, brought out a letter, took a bit of paper from it and held it out to her. "The latest snapshot, taken at the summer camp up in Maine," he explained briefly. "His name is Alan Hoyt Morse and he has just told me that he is coming here to live after he finishes some work he has to do in the fall."

Claire's eyes widened. "He's a good-looker all right," she murmured and subsided. Evidently she was beginning more and more to regret her former eagerness to leave The Hermitage.

Hoyt handed the photograph to Carol. "He's a fine fellow, Miss Breck, and I really do hope you two may be good friends some day. Young men like him are not as thick as blackberries, and he's a regular athlete, too. You ought to see him play football, or basket-ball, or tennis, or polo, or pull an oar. . . ."

Carol looked at the strong, handsome face, the lithe body and the firm slender hands of the young man in rough woods attire who bent laughing over a fluffy bear cub which he was about to feed from a pan in his hand, and she spoke impulsively. "He looks splendid, Mr. Hoyt. It will be fine for you to have a young man about the place again." She halted in dismay at the change on Mr. Hoyt's face as he received the photograph from her.

"Now I've done it again," she thought with remorse. "I've reminded him of that young Mr. Parsons he was so fond of. I'll never learn to be kind and tactful, I guess." Then she added aloud, "Will he be here before the first of November?"

CHAPTER X

DREAMS AND WAKING

IN a small dark room in an old world hotel, Frederick Parsons, known recently to himself and to the people with whom he had travelled as Frederick Perkins, sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. A great bell was chiming and he counted the strokes . . . twelve . . . thirteen . . . fourteen . . .

"Two o'clock," he muttered drowsily. "Belgian time. Yes, of course. Curt and I came here from the hospital at Romantin. It's too dark to see but I know he's in the other bed. He must be asleep, poor chap. The trip was rough on him."

He felt a stab of pity that was almost shame at his own recovery, though it had been long enough, too. Poor old Curt would never be well. The doctor had told him there was a chance if he got home, but that was only to help him over the hard road he was to go . . . stop a bit . . . Curt had passed out . . .

He sprang out of bed and struck a match. An unfamiliar room flared up in the brief illumination. He had never seen this room. He stared at the wash-stand and the feather-bed coverlet on the narrow bed, and at the casement window, half-hid in chintz curtains. He had not come here last night.

"Last night Curt and I came from the train to the hospital here and to-morrow we were to go on to the boat. . . ."

A sharp pain in his head made him clutch the bedpost. What had happened to him? Had he wandered into another ward in his sleep? No, this was an hotel. Wait. He must try to think. He sank down on the bed, only to get up, strike another match and light the candle on the bed-stand. He was afraid of the dark; the pain in his head was terrible in the darkness. It was better when he could see, however dimly, the surrounding objects. He steadied himself and went stumblingly to the window, drew the curtain aside and peered out into the dimness that lies upon the world before the grey dawn comes. A silhouette of uneven roofs and chimney-pots, with two towers. The chimes that rang the quarter of the hour broke out joyously as he stared, and the notes swept the cobwebs from memory.

"St. Gudule!" he exclaimed. "Brussels. And this is not the year after the war. It is nine years after. I have come over on that job for the Electric people. I took the boat from Boston. And I'm going on to Lyons. I have my passport and papers, all in order, in that bag on the floor by the foot of the bed. Why did I stop in Brussels, though? I intended to go straight through. . . ."

Once again, the swift pain made him tremble, and a fine dew sprang out on his forehead and upper lip and he sat down. He sat resolutely there, however, with his head in his tense hands. He would not reach for the brown bag. He must fight out this battle with oblivion to the finish. He would compel himself to remember every detail that now eluded him.

The window was greying with the first herald of morning when he gave it up. The pain was too sharp. He needed his strength for better things. He reached for the bag, opened it, and then laid it down.

"A fresh candle," he murmured, as he rose. "Lucky there are two here on the bureau. I may need them both. Light is what I want."

He made a sort of ceremony of it. He lighted the taller candle and set it on the stand, adjusted the wick and stood the last candle beside it, though he knew the day would be fully come before the lighted candle could burn low. Then he wiped his brow and took up the bag again.

He took out the underclothes, the extra socks, the roll with his few poor toilet things. There was very little in the bag. The long envelope with the passport was in one of the side-flaps. A package of cigarettes helped him. His hands did not tremble so much as he opened the long envelope.

"Frederick Perkins?" He stared at the name and then at the photograph of a fellow with a beard. The pain stabbed him and his hands shook but he held the photograph closer to the candle. His hand crept to his chin. "By Jove!" he mumbled. "A beard! I didn't ever have a beard. . . ."

Yet instead of adding to his confusion, this photograph seemed to have opened some door that had been closed before. He no longer trembled. He became another man. He went to the chair where his clothes were hung, and deftly and systematically he went through the pockets. A little loose change. Another smaller envelope addressed to M. Harfleur in Mons. He opened the letter without hesitation, though it was sealed securely.

There were only a few sentences; it told M. Harfleur that the bearer of the letter was wanted in the Bucks County, Pennsylvania, courts for the larceny of a ruby ring belonging to Mr. Alan Hoyt, The Hermitage, Warrington, Pa. Only that. Typed on a sheet of paper without a water-mark or other means of identification.

In a flash he knew who had given him that envelope. A sleek-haired girl called Miss Jordon, who had befriended him somehow and somewhere—he would remember that later. He had received a box from her. Yes, a box that was to be delivered secretly. It was in the lining of the heavy great-coat she had insisted on his carrying with him; as protection against the cold sea-airs, she had said.

He walked to the window before he made further investigation. He wanted to be sure he was clear-minded. He recognized the town's sky-line, now that it was emerging from the dim grey dawn. He named some of the streets that were around the Cathedral, to assure himself of his mental balance. Then he went back to the great-coat. He knew where in the lining she had sewed the small, rather heavy package, which he had agreed to deliver into the hands of M. Harfleur and no other.

He took a long time, for the seals must not be broken. The candle helped in softening them. When the box was out of its wrappers, he found a soft roll of cotton cloth.

He gave a low whistle as he saw what the roll contained. "Apostle spoons!" he cried under his breath. "The spoons Hoyt showed me just before . . . before . . ." He could not recall the event of his leaving The Hermitage but he could not wait for that. "Six spoons. Yes, the same old maker's name . . . the date-letter . . . the lion passant ——"

A sound startled him. It was only the maid in the room in the attic above, putting out a heavy foot on the creaking floor. He heard her clump about, muttering drowsily, and his face relaxed. He went on with his business of piecing together the puzzle.

"The same spoons, but only six. Hoyt had twelve. Where are the rest? Why was I sent with these? They told me the box held legal papers."

He wrapped the box in its papers but did not seal it. He sat on the bed smoking and he felt stronger every minute. The maid's heavy tread above ceased, came down the stair in the hall outside his door and faded into the subdued, growing sounds of morning. He smoked his last cigarettes. St. Gudule's tower poured out a flood of mellow notes to greet the first pale streak in the eastern sky.

"I am being made a cat's-paw of, and for no good purpose," he summed up with decision as he flung the extinguished stub into the empty fireplace and began to arrange his belongings. "I shall not deliver the spoons to M. Harfleur . . . of whom I have some shady memories, I believe. Let me see—what was it? Yes, when I was in Mons two years after the war, after Mother died and I came over with the Legion, that little sneak who won L'Enfant's watch on a sham bet sold it to a man named Harfleur, who was a receiver of stolen goods according to L'Enfant's brother . . . a fence, as they call them."

He halted in the process of laying out his razor and soap to go over the letter which he had found inside the box. It was on the same paper:

> "Sell to M. Dobrovsky at top price. One at a time. There are more but not ready. Tell him you have located the Stuart spoon and will have it in another fortnight. Deposit money in usual bank. Will be on hand shortly. Get rid of bearer, if troublesome."

It was signed with an illegible scrawl that no doubt was familiar to M. Harfleur. Parsons frowned at it and then tucked it away in the inner lining of his coat sleeve. He felt sure that he also knew the writer.

When he was about to take up his razor, he hesitated. He would not shave just yet. He must go out as he had come Frederick Perkins, a bearded American, enroute for Mons on a matter of business or pleasure. He pulled the bell-cord, for he wanted to show himself in this character as much as possible. It would make his disappearance easier, once he had got rid of his beard and bought other clothes in another town.

"*L'eau chaud, s'il vous plait,*" he said to the wrinkled red-faced chambermaid.

"*Oui, m'sieu,*" she replied stolidly. "I'll heat some."

He was busy in the interval. He moved quickly, making his preparations. He took out his wallet, as if some new idea had come to him and he scrutinized the neat pile of crisp ten dollar bills; two hundred dollars in all. In the corner of each was a blurred numeral that was scarcely noticeable. He nodded. He had not been two years in a bank for nothing. He rolled the notes up tightly and put them in the empty box intended for M. Harfleur and sealed it afresh with the aid of the candle. He was quite ready when the maid's foot-falls were heard toiling up the long flight of stairs. When she knocked on the door and peered in through the crack that he opened to her, she saw a small bag, a heavy overcoat and a hat on the chair by the door.

"You can't have any breakfast at this hour," she told him sourly. "The dining-room isn't open yet. You'd ought to have given notice last night."

"That's all right, angel-face," he answered gayly. "I'll manage until I get to where I am going. Mons is as good a place as any for breakfast, don't you think?"

She sniffed. These fresh Americans made her tired. "I never ate in Mons," she retorted. "Brussels is good enough for me." She fired a parting shot as she started down the red-carpeted steps, walking on the marble so as to save the carpet, according to instructions from the Maitre d'Hotel. "You'll wait a good while for breakfast, if you're going to Mons. There isn't any train yet and it takes a good while to get there."

He kissed his finger-tips to her departing back. "All the more appetite for the meal," he laughed.

He finished his dressing some fifteen minutes later and again he halted, struck by an idea. "Harfleur must have the other six spoons," he told himself. "I can't go to him, for I've got to take these back where they belong. I can do my best to make him return them, though."

He wrote rapidly a few lines and with infinite difficulty he managed to insert the note securely into the sealed box intended for Harfleur of Mons, without disturbing the wrappers too much. Then he hastily took his belongings and, with the box under one arm, went downstairs. The place was empty save for the chambermaid, who merely frowned at him as he passed her. He was glad he had paid in advance. He had the receipted bill ready to show if anyone halted him. He went without hindrance, however, and was on the street just as the first rays of the early sun touched the twin spires of St. Gudule.

"The Station du Midi lies southward, so I must go in that direction. Mademoiselle might be keeping an eye on me, for women, even old crusty chambermaids, are curious."

He went rapidly along the Rue de Montagne until he was at the corner of the narrower Rue de Arenburg and then he turned sharp to the left and made his way towards the Boulevard du Nord. He bought a ticket at the Station du Nord and then went out and mailed a package addressed to M. Harfleur, Mons.

The guard glanced at his ticket as he came to the gate. "*Oui, m'sieu, Anvers.*"

Mr. Frederick Parsons, alias Frederick Perkins, smiled to himself as he passed on into the train. "Antwerp is an interesting old place," he thought. "I wonder if there are any friends of mine hanging about there still? I suppose not. Ten years is a long time. But you never know . . ."

While all this was going on in Brussels, other things were happening far away across the turbulent Atlantic. At The Hermitage the night, which had brought Frederick Parsons back to himself, was filled with soft murmuring winds and leafy whisperings. The stars shone in a peaceful sky and the countryside lay wrapped in dreams. The old house was dark, save for a single light that burned in Mr. Hoyt's study on the second floor.

Carol wakened late this peaceful night with the sensation of a drowning swimmer; she was suffocating, dying. "Oh," she cried out. "Oh-h-h . . ."

In the dream she could hear the scream echo through the darkness. It brought her back to consciousness, and it was only a faint whisper in her throat. The black waters ebbed into a shallow pool, dried, and became her own bed, soft and warm in the dimness of her own room. The frantic beating of her heart, the dry gasping in her throat calmed. She sat up in bed.

"I've had a nightmare," she thought.

Then she heard the creak of the elevator ropes. Mr. Hoyt must be ill. Why she thought this, she did not stop to consider. She sprang to the floor and pulled at the knob of her door. Another instant she was in the hall, and then in the sitting-room where the light was burning. It was empty. There were voices below. Up through the shaft of the elevator came a thick whisper. She leaned and caught it.

"He's croaked, the fool! Beat it, you."

"A nice mess," the other voice hissed and then there was a sound of running feet.

She flew to the window, pulled the curtain aside and saw a dim form running towards the garden. She had only a brief glimpse, blurred by darkness, before it disappeared, evidently following the first man into the night, but she saw that it ran with an odd swift limping motion as though one ankle were stiff.

"They've been trying to get in," the whirl in her brain spun out. "Biggs must be down there."

Biggs' door was shut and locked. Mr. Hoyt's bedroom door was open and unlighted. She fumbled for the switch, found it, and the room leaped into brilliance. It was empty.

Back in the sitting-room, she tried the elevator ropes. They did not move to all her strength. She flew to Biggs' room and pounded on the door, then to Mrs. Biggs' room next door. They were up and calling out to her. Everything seemed unreal, the sound of Biggs' voice demanding to be let out, Mrs. Biggs' shrill voice saying that her door was locked and there was no key. The crash of Biggs' frail door brought her to herself again and she realized that here was something worse than a couple of foiled robbers making off through the darkness.

Biggs rushed out in voluminous night-shirt and hair on end, valiant as a lion, and she cried the news to him while she searched on the floor beside Mrs. Biggs' locked door.

"Mr. Hoyt's gone, and I heard men's voices. I saw them running. They went by the back way."

Biggs was tugging at the elevator ropes. "There's something holding her down there," he muttered, and he picked up a brass paper-knife. It was the only sharp instrument at hand.

Carol found the key and used it with fingers suddenly made steady by fear. Mrs. Biggs came out, forgetful of crimpers and bare feet. She was beside her husband as they rushed downstairs, and she snatched the little marble figure from the niche in the stairway as she went. It was solid marble, and could be used as a club if needed.

The light was now on in the study and at the first glance it appeared empty. As they halted, however, Carol saw the elevator, with a huddled figure lying half inside the small triangular lift and half on the floor outside.

Mr. Hoyt lay face down, in a slow-creeping puddle of blood.

CHAPTER XI

SHADOWS

BIGGS picked him up and laid him on the couch. He did not open his eyes and his face was dreadful with the blood-stains and pallor.

"He's dead," Carol said, and she trembled.

Biggs paid no attention to her words. He took the cuff of his night-shirt to wipe the red stain from the set mouth. Mrs. Biggs flew to the pantry-closet for her first aid kit.

"I'll telephone for the doctor," Carol whispered. "Perhaps he isn't really . . . quite . . ."

She lifted the receiver from the hook and paused with her hand over the mouthpiece to hear what Biggs was saying. "Don't let him tell the police," Biggs hissed, loyal in his fright. "No cops on this till the Boss is able to . . ."

She broke in on him. "The wire is cut," she cried. "There isn't a sound."

"Go over to Hallman's," he commanded, as he took the kit from his wife's hands. "The keys for the little car are on my table there."

She found the table in the ante-room, got the keys, without stopping to switch on the lights, and ran downstairs, pursued by the dreadful heavy breathing that had begun when Hoyt had been laid on the couch.

She snatched a flashlight from the hall table as she ran. She was so excited that she did not know she was barefoot until her toe touched the edge of a cold object just inside the hall door. She stooped and flashed her torch upon it. It was a steel instrument such as burglars use to pry open a shutter or door.

She was about to pick it up when she stopped. Finger-prints. She tore a strip from the edge of her bath-robe—it was lucky the stuff was not new and tough—and took the jimmy up within its folds. Then she thrust the thing in her deep pocket.

"It may be no good, but I've got it," she thought, as she hurried on.

She got in the car and as she started down the slope, she saw the red star of a rear-light: another car was starting off from the point on the highway that was visible for a second as she raced along.

"There they are," she thought. "Oh, if I could only see their number!"

She stepped on the gas but when she reached the high road the car was gone, in which direction she could not tell. She turned into Hallman's lane. She dared not waste time. Mr. Hoyt might be dead. . . .

Then as she swung about, she saw a flicker across the meadows. A firefly on the wide space. Her heart stopped and then pounded wildly. She was about to stop, when she recognized that spark. It was Claire returning from her trip to town; for she had gone, as she had planned, telling Carol that she must see the lawyer again in a last effort to get news of her aunt's bequests.

Her mind was a jumble; words seemed to float on the surface; she seemed to hear them as if spoken by a clear voice. She found herself repeating as she reached the old snake fence that was a landmark on the Hallman place, " Someone *was* there in the tower. They wiped the dust from the sill because they had left some marks there where they leaned to look out." And then she thought, as if in reply, " But that was long ago." Then, " They must have come here to spy out the place where Mr. Hoyt kept his valuables." This passed and left only a feverish desire to get the help needed for the wounded man.

She raced up the bumpy lane and stopped beside the office, a tiny neat frame addition to the house. " If Rollo doesn't bark too loud, I'll go right in," she thought. " The door isn't locked, I know."

Rollo did not bark but he leaped about her rattling his chain and as she put her hand on the door-knob, a voice called to her from an upper window.

" Who's that? "

" It's Carol Breck from The Hermitage. Mr. Hoyt is ill and I want to call the doctor. Our 'phone's out of order. May I use yours? "

" Sure. Help yourself. I heard the car and I says to Emma, ' Maybe it's robbers.' But we don't have them sort about here, I guess. Nothin' serious with the Boss? He was lookin' smart enough to-day."

She did not wait for his garrulity. She had the Crow's Nest, delivered her message, came out and got in the car before she answered him. He still hung out the window to get the news.

"We don't know how ill he is. He had a—sort of fainting fit."

"Is that so? Want I should come over? I'll get into my pants and be right along if you'll wait a bit."

The kindness in his voice halted her for a second. "I think . . . I hope he'll be all right," she replied. "We'll let you know in the morning. There isn't anything you can do now, thank you."

As she hurried from the car she found Claire shivering inside the garden, none too well pleased at having to wait in the dew.

"I've been here for five minutes," she said in an aggrieved tone. "You must have been sound asleep. What are you doing in your bath-robe? Why are those cars chasing about here? I heard one just come in—the third one, beside the one we—I met on the pike."

Carol told her briefly. "Now slip upstairs by the back way and get into your kimono," she said. "They needn't know you've been out so late. I'll go up the front way and lock your door, and then after a while I'll come and unlock it." Even in the turmoil of the hour, she had enough compassion for Claire to want to shield her from Mrs. Biggs' mild disapproval of late hours. "That's the Major's car, over there by the side door. He must have simply flown."

"The other one was here first, though," Claire told her, pointing to the machine on the front drive. "It came chasing in from the front road. Mrs. Biggs was talking like everything but I couldn't hear what she said. I was too far away."

As she fled away she could hear frightened sobs and disjointed questions flung after her but she would not stay. She must tell Mrs. Biggs that she had come back, lest more worriment be added to the valiant little woman's score.

About half an hour later Dr. Byrnes came out into the hall where the two girls waited. Claire, in her new breakfast wrap, with her hair dishevelled, was pale and shivering. Carol, clothed and calmer, sat beside her on the wooden settle. The doctor looked at the two girls and he thought, "That blonde beauty is the sort that goes to pieces in an emergency. The black-haired one is better stuff. Those grey eyes with the thick black lashes and that fine mouth don't belong to a parlor pet. She'll understand what is said to her."

So he directed his words to Carol. "Mr. Hoyt is still unconscious. He does not appear to have been seriously injured. A knock on the head that should come out all right. A matter of time. Which of you two saw the burglars?"

As he had expected, it was the black-haired one. She told her story in a few clear words. She said, "I waked in a nightmare. The study was lighted and the elevator would not work when I tried to pull it up. I heard two voices. Then I saw a man getting over the garden wall. Biggs broke open his door, and I unlocked Mrs. Biggs' door. Mr. Hoyt was in the elevator—half in and half out. When we found the wire had been cut, I went over to Hallman's. I found this when I stepped outside."

He took the jimmy from her. It was wrapped in a piece of blue material. She told him she had not touched it since she picked it up. He looked at it and put it in his pocket. " The police ought to hear about this," he said. " I'll try to persuade Major Walton to use a little sense. The neighborhood isn't safe if thugs can walk into a house and lay a man low and then get away as easy as this."

Major Walton came out as he spoke. He looked grey and shocked but he was composed. He nodded to Carol.

" I was waiting up—reading in the library. When you telephoned I thought it was Manuelo, with word that he was not coming back for the night. Dr. Byrnes was over at O'Brians', so he beat me here. What I'd like to know is, did you see the man who was getting away? Clearly enough to identify him? "

She shook her head. " I noticed that he ran in an odd way—awkwardly, as though he had a stiff ankle. That was all. I was too far away and I was terribly excited. When I went out I saw a car down on the pike, but it was gone by the time I reached the road."

" What would you have done if it had been there? " Dr. Byrnes put the question with speculative eyes. He was interested in this type. A good head and erect bearing and magnetism; yes, the girl was worth studying. She had her share of brains.

" I thought I'd get near enough to get their number and then come back," she said. " I couldn't have done any good by trying to stop them. I had to telephone for help, anyway. Mr. Hoyt was dying, I thought."

" You'll pass." The doctor did not say it aloud but he looked with satisfaction at the girl. A fine type. He must ask Hoyt about her. Hoyt would be out of the woods in a day or so. He needed a girl like that in his laboratory work. He could train her, if she hadn't been prepared. She would need only the most elementary knowledge.

Major Walton was speaking. "The safe has been opened and the spoons are gone," he said quietly. "The fan, too, for that matter. I have looked over all the rest of the house but nothing else appears to have been disturbed. There are a few articles thrown about the dining-room and study, but nothing has been taken. Was your door locked, Miss Breck, or did they overlook it in their haste?"

"It was locked and the key gone, but it has a queer lock—sometimes it holds and sometimes it doesn't. I remember it stuck when I first tried to get out," Carol replied. She did not speak of the spoons and fan. It was too great a loss to lament just now. She only murmured, "Poor Biggs, he'll be about crazy . . . everything at once . . ."

The doctor looked at her sharply. "You two girls had better go to bed," he pronounced. "There's nothing to be done to-night and you might as well get some sleep. Major Walton and I will be here and attend to everything."

As they went their separate ways, he turned to the Major. "I'm still convinced that you are wrong in not calling the police," he said. "There are a few clues to start them on,—this jimmy," and he handed the blue-roll to the Major, who took it without a word, "and the fact that the second fellow had an odd way of running. I think . . ."

"Time enough for that when we find Hoyt in condition to decide," the Major interrupted. He was tired of this harping on the police. He knew Hoyt would never forgive him if he consented to such a thing. He had some notions of his own about the matter, anyway. He'd get out Hoyt's microscope at once.

It was after breakfast the next morning that Claire startled Carol by bursting into tears. "Aunt Julia hasn't left me a cent," she wept, "and now all this has happened. I ought to go, I know. But I haven't a cent. I wish I had a home."

Carol was sorry for her. Claire must be feeling extremely desolate to voice such a wish. She had always been thankful that she had no encumbrances.

"Don't worry," she said, putting a hand on her shoulder as they went upstairs. "Mr. Hoyt is going to get well, and he won't turn you out. We'll find a position for you soon. I know a lot of people . . ."

"He hasn't waked up yet," interrupted Claire. "That old Dr. Byrnes may be fooling us." She dried her tears. "Let's peep in at the door and see how he looks. I've never seen a person who was unconscious. Mercy, how hard he breathes. It sounds as if he were going to pass out."

Carol reluctantly allowed herself to be drawn into the study and to a point where the bed in the other room was visible. Mr. Hoyt lay with closed eyes and bandaged head, breathing regularly in the thick hoarse fashion that was so unnerving to Carol. Mrs. Biggs' back was turned.

As they stared fascinated, the heavy breathing changed, Hoyt stirred, opened his eyes, and a faint sound came from his throat. Mrs. Biggs flew to the bed, just as he tried to raise himself. Claire stood where she was but Carol found herself at the bedside opposite Mrs. Biggs. Together they supported him.

"Did they get away?" he asked in a strange voice. "I heard them."

Mrs. Biggs tried to soothe him. "Never mind, never mind. It's all right," she told him. "Lay down and rest a bit and then we can talk. They hurt you bad, poor dear."

Carol felt Hoyt's shoulder quiver in her grasp. "They didn't hurt me," he said, more distinctly. "I heard a noise and went to see. I fell. I was walking."

"Yes, yes, of course you were." Mrs. Biggs signalled to Carol that he was delirious. "Miss Breck'll tell the Major, if you'll just lie down. The Major's still here."

At that Hoyt suffered himself to be lowered to his pillow. He frowned at Mrs. Biggs, and mumbled to himself. Carol hurried to the study and bumped into the Major who had been summoned by frightened Claire. "What's this about Hoyt's dying?" he whispered fiercely. "Why didn't you send that dunce for the doctor?"

Hoyt's weak voice came from the other room. "I walked, I tell you. And I fell when the elevator stopped. I walked the whole length of the study, before I heard the noise. Nobody hit me. I struck my head as I fell."

When the Major was beside his bed, he added more emphatically, " I was walking about. I can walk now. What is Mrs. Biggs trying to say about robbers almost killing me? "

The Major stayed with him the rest of the morning and Mr. Hoyt seemed to be in a fair way to justify Dr. Byrnes' prophecy; he did not have a relapse when he heard all that his friend had to tell him, and he remained quietly in bed, as the doctor had advised. Carol, of course, had no knowledge of what passed between the two men, except that Biggs informed her Mr. Alan had no notion of calling in the police.

Claire was too exhausted by her fright to attempt to stay up and she also spent the day in her room and most of it in bed. Carol had to submit to an hour in her room, in order to appease Mrs. Biggs whose care of her was most solicitous. She could not sleep and spent the time reading, sitting by her window in the warm sunshine. She saw the Major go out but if she could have seen the direction he took, she might have been surprised.

He went rapidly, driving towards a neat stone building ten miles away where a white-haired man sat at a desk in a clean, orderly room. It was not a room, strictly speaking, but an enclosed section of floor-space where two corridors met. There were rooms on either side, with regular doors and glass partitions, but this room had no door; the entire corridor looked in upon it.

The white-haired man looked up at the sound of a footstep on the floor. " Why, Major, you're a stranger," he said. " I sort of expected you in sooner to go over the ads. There they are on the board there."

He rose and came to the partition-wall of the right-hand room which formed one side of his enclosure. The large black-painted bulletin board was almost covered with sheets, flyers, advertisements in all sorts of types and sizes for all sorts of wanted criminals.

Major Walton had not come on the quest that his friend supposed, though he did not say so. He adjusted his glasses. " I thought you had no clues in that case," he remarked. " It wasn't your case, was it? The robberies were in New York, Baltimore and Chicago, if I remember rightly."

" That's right about the robberies," admitted the white-haired custodian. " But there were a couple of bills passed on Buck Johnson, our garage fellow, the day he came east. He didn't know they were counterfeit until he'd been here a couple of days, when he read in the paper that some ten-dollar notes had been circulating around Chicago, and he got curious. He brought them in to me, and I sent them to the chief of police out there, with a loose sort of description of the man—Buck isn't much on description. I kept the photograph of one with a finger-print on it," and he pointed to a photostat of a new, much wrinkled ten-dollar note. " I'm always kind of hoping to get a clue. Funny, isn't it, how you'll take a fancy that way. And there's not a chance in the world."

" Get away every time, eh? " The Major was scrutinizing the finger-print with great care. He seemed to be unusually near-sighted this morning. "Well, it's not much of an exhibit, Henderson, but it may catch them yet. How was the fellow so careless as to leave his finger-print on that note? Black and greasy enough it is, too."

"Buck says he'd wiped his hands very particular indeed—he'd got some grease on 'em before he took out his wallet—but this little finger must have been left out in the clean-up. It's a good clear print all right and Mr. Counterfeiter doesn't know he left it behind him."

As Henderson turned to his desk to get out some papers for a man who had come in from the other offices, the Major ended his scrutiny. He carelessly thrust into his pocket the scrap of paper he had held concealed in his palm. It was a photostat of the finger-prints on the jimmy. He had found no prints anything like those on the paper. He had accomplished the errand on which he had come.

"Well, I'll be moving on," he said, cheerfully. "I'll be in again when you aren't busy. I want to hear some of those new vocal records. Great help in locating criminals, I should think. Good-bye."

Henderson threw a response after him; he was used to the Major's abrupt manners. He knew him well. He thought, as he sorted the papers, "I'll bet he's got some clue. He had something in his hand. He'll be back soon. Funny if he'd put us on the right track, after all. He's been pottering around a lot, I guess, trying to get something on the Harper case. He's a bug on old, ancient stuff, they say, though I haven't ever heard him say much about silver cups."

Aloud he said to the man who waited, " If we could land those crooks that got the Harper Standing-cup, we'd be in luck, eh, Waters? I've a sort of hunch that we're going to run into those fellows some day."

CHAPTER XII

A PARTNERSHIP IS FORMED

ALL the while they were running along the broad road from Pompton Carol had been silent. Mr. Warren was glad he did not have to talk. He hated to have to chatter about scenery while he was driving. Mrs. Warren and her friend Mrs. Stoner were comfortable on the back seat, filled with the peace that a good lunch brings. They, too, could dispense with comments on what they were passing. They spoke occasionally in brief sentences about Edna Cara at the summer camp up beyond Poughkeepsie—Mrs. Warren's only excuse for this delightful trip, or of Mary Willie, Mrs. Stoner's eldest who was to enter Sweet Briar in the fall.

"Mary Willie would simply adore Vassar, but I can't bear to let my little girl go so far away," Mrs. Stoner murmured, as she settled herself more cozily in her corner. "We mothers have much to bear. All the Stoners have gone to Sweet Briar, and it's right natural for Mary Willie to stay in Virginia with us."

Carol did not hear her, nor did she notice the soft regular sound that came from the back seat as Mrs. Stoner took her rest. Mr. Warren grinned to himself. He had heard a lot about Mary Willie. He'd seen her when they were south in the spring and she wasn't a patch on Edna. He drove a bit faster. He wanted to get to Poughkeepsie and say good-bye to this girl, a nice girl, but his wife had told him he mustn't smoke his old pipe while she was beside him. Poughkeepsie was a good way off.

Carol watched the broad road unroll, flecked with shadows or warm with sunshine. Lovely Wanaukie slid past in a gleam of blue lakes and green mountains as she planned. "I'll show Alice the *flabellum* first and see how she likes it, and then . . ."

"Ever have a nerve killed in a tooth?" Mr. Warren rubbed his cheek with a cautious finger. "I've got one here that's dying hard. It's not comfortable, though that dentist of mine was mighty cheerful about it. I wish he had it in his mouth."

"Dentists are always so hopeful about the pain," she agreed. "It *is* easy to bear other people's troubles. Mother says that other people's misery is like our clothes, that we hang up every night, but our own are like our skin," and she laughed at a memory of her own.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Mind if I smoke?" he inquired. "This tooth . . ."

He was happier when his pipe was lighted. He asked about Mr. Hoyt, whom he had met at a dinner at the Manufacturers Club long ago. "Nice fellow. Not much of a booster but a good steady chap. That's how he impressed me. Pity he had that breakdown. You say he's all right?"

"Yes, he's quite well now," she replied. "He is walking a little more every day. You see, he tried to do too much at first and he wasn't strong enough." She had to guard herself not to let slip any hint of the robbery. She changed the subject, to be quite safe. "Edna will be a junior next semester, won't she? I didn't see so much of her last year because I was working too hard to play around much. She has a good time. She's awfully popular with the girls."

"She's a pretty good sport," her father agreed, gratified. "I tell her to have a good time. That's what girls' colleges are for. What are you going in for yourself?" He liked this girl, now that she had waked up. He'd talk a while to keep down that confounded pain in his tooth.

Carol saw an opportunity and, though she quaked at her own temerity, rushed into a short, lively description of what she and Alice wanted to do with their shop.

He enjoyed his pipe and the beauty of the scene and this good-looking girl's bright way of putting things. He swung into the main highway at Sloatsburg feeling a whole lot better. "We'll be up again in November," he told her, "and we'll drop in. There might be some things that Mrs. Warren would like,—for Christmas presents, you know. I'm not much on these fancy Gift Shop-pees myself, but when a girl is trying to make good, we all ought to lend a hand. That's our Rotary key-note—service."

She had secured her first customer. Mr. Warren was not a man who forgot his promises. She planned to herself as the car sped northward and she saw a golden future ahead of her when, in November, she should come up to this well-known country again. The tower of the library at Vassar, showing over the treetops, beckoned her with benign interest. It was as though Alice, in its pleasant shade, were already listening to her good news.

The level campus was a green velvet carpet in the sunshine, and the scattered groups loitering from lecture-room or dining-hall made bright patterns among the trees and on the walks. Carol had left the Warrens at the entrance—Mr. Warren's tooth made him impatient to get to the journey's end—and she had walked in straight towards Main, looking about on all sides for Alice.

" She may be in her room," she thought. " They've all been moved over to Main, she said. There's no use going to the Quadrangle. Oh, there she is."

Alice, on the steps of the library, had not seen her and she hurried. It would be fun to surprise her. Alice's blonde head was turned the other way, and she kept it fixed; evidently she expected Carol to get out of an automobile that had just driven in. Carol tiptoed over the walk and came up behind her. How good she looked, dear old chum—soft gold hair, dainty blue dress, fair delicate flesh—she was as fine as ever. Just as Carol was about to touch her, she turned around.

" We're in luck to-night, Caramel," she remarked casually as if Carol had sauntered around the corner from a lecture-room. " We feed at Alumni. Old Beefy's cousin has turned up and is feeding us. We'll float over as soon as you dump your freight." Her face was illumined as if there were a light inside, and she laughed softly. She was glad to see Carol.

When they were in her room, she put her long arms about Carol in a sudden warm embrace. "My word, it's good to feel your bony carcass, old lady." She laughed off her emotion. "It's a slow business, grubbing along among the summer casuals alone. I'm growing frowsy as a hermit. I'll have a beard next. Don't bother about your hair. There are only a few Ancient Mariners and a lot of wives and mothers. You look like a lovely lady out of a Seyffert canvas."

Carol would not be dragged off, however, until she had torn the wrappings from the flat box she had carried with such care all the way from The Hermitage. She brought out the treasure on which she had spent many hopeful hours. If Alice didn't like it . . .

"My faith! what a beauty!" cried Alice, receiving it into careful hands. "Where did you get it? Is it to be our chief exhibit? It's the real thing, whatever it is."

"It isn't the real thing," Carol explained, joyously. "I made it. It's a temple fan, and we can sell them——"

"To our dear co-workers," cried Alice, delightedly. You could always rely on her to get the point without too much chat. "They'll eat them up, my dear. But tell me, where did you corral such a bonnie, bonnie bit? It's new to me. *Flabellum?* That is the stuff. Here, I'll stick it up on this wall, so that Beefy's beaming eye lands on it when she breezes in. See if she doesn't order a dozen of them for her cousins out in the fastnesses of Dakota. There, it looks like sure profits to me. Now, come along. It's after seven and we'll eat nubbins, and Beefy will be wild. She's only dangerous when she scents chilled steak, you know."

"Just a second," pleaded Carol. "I simply must see your outfit and the necklace you said you had started to make. I shan't eat a scrap unless I see it."

"Well, if it's a case of a hunger strike ——" laughed Alice. "It's over there on the table with the cover over it. I haven't done as much as I expected to. . . ."

As they were almost ready to leave the table Beatrice Harford smiled across the chocolate éclair that she was devastating with the skill of long practice.

"I'd like mighty well to get in on this tea-party of yours," she said, in her slow drawl. Her plump pink face radiated good-will. "Of course, I'm not smart like you two but I could sort of—well,—chip in. I'd put in some cash. And I've got horse sense. My dad taught me a lot about business. I could be a sort of silent partner, couldn't I?"

Alice looked at her in surprise. "Why, Beefy, you amaze me," she exclaimed. "I thought you considered all these girlish efforts beneath your notice. You made no end of fun of Lucy Werts and her Calendar Shop. I haven't peeped a syllable about our great scheme because I felt it would bring down a shower of rocks."

"Bosh," returned Beefy, complacently scraping up the last of the chocolate icing. "That was different. You're my friend. You've done a lot for me. Remember when I first came?" she asked Carol. "Most of the girls thought I was a joke. And maybe I was," she added, thoughtfully. "But I'm not now."

Carol remembered the fat, shy "poor little rich girl" of last year, and how hard it had been to make friends with her. Alice had been more successful than she had, and Beatrice had developed one of those fervid crushes for her lively mentor that are so common among cloistered womankind. She had allowed Alice to make her over, sartorially and otherwise. She could not be brilliant and so she tried to be appreciative. She smoothed her sleek waves of brown hair and glanced down at her soft green chiffon; last year she would never have thought of wearing such darling bronze pumps.

"And so I ought to be allowed to come in on the ground floor," she went on. "I've got two hundred dollars that I didn't have any use for till now. I want to put it in. Half in stock and half in the Company. That's all right, isn't it?"

"*Is* it?" echoed Carol gayly. "You're a financial genius, Beefy, and a real friend. Haven't you got some wings hidden there under your shoulder-knot? Now, if you are both through, we'll go over and say good-night to your cousin—it's too bad she had to have a headache when she was giving us such a good time—and then we can settle down to map out our partnership. I've only got to-night, you know."

Bird-like little Miss Harford met them as they left the dining-room. She had come down for a cup of tea. She was better but could not stand the odors of the dining-room, yet. Beefy insisted on getting the tea for her, and the two other girls waited with her in the Florentine Room, talking softly, thanking her for the treat. She told them she was only here for a day or so. She had intended taking Beatrice to the seashore with her for a week or two before she went back home but her niece had preferred to stay.

" I find her immensely improved," she chirped. " She used to be a regular tomboy, cared nothing for clothes. College life does a lot for a girl."

Carol looked at the plain little figure standing in the subdued glow of the tall floor lamps, with the rich-colored background of the golden-doored Oakley panel behind her and the carved beauty of old refectory tables and high-backed chairs around her, all reflected in ruddy light and shadow on the polished floor beneath her sensible flat-heeled shoes, and she thought that four years of Vassar had not affected her outwardly, at least.

" Alice helped her get her things this year," she said impulsively. "And she has excellent good taste, you know."

She was sorry she had been so impetuous, for Alice's face clouded. Miss Harford, however, did not appear annoyed at the unintentional slur on Beefy's home circle. She nodded amiably.

" Associations mean a great deal," she agreed. " Ah, here is my tea. Thank you, Beatrice my dear. Now I must say good-bye. Go out on the terrace and have some more ice-cream or anything you like. It is very pleasant out there."

Alice looked after her as she went up the polished stair. "She's a duck," she pronounced. "Beefy, you've got to ask her about chipping in. If she approves, it's all right. If not, you're out of it. She's all the family you've got right here, and—my faith, she's quick enough when she wants to be, isn't she?" she broke off to say, as Beatrice, without a word, sped after her Cousin Emily. "Did I tell you she had ordered a beaten gold necklace?"

Half an hour later, under the big awning of the terrace, they had come to a clear understanding. Beefy was to keep the accounts, Alice to make jewelry and write the notices, Carol was to manufacture fans, sell goods on the holidays and generally help out.

"You've got the charm, my child. Your victims will simply love you," Alice said, lazily watching the fountain in the midst of the pool as it bubbled and sparkled in the fading light. "I can gabble when there's no need for it but I fall down when it comes to selling goods. Beefy fairly thrust her order on me. I think she used chloroform, didn't you, Beefs?"

Carol laughed and then sobered. "I never knew I could sell things," she confessed. "But when Mr. Warren asked about our shop, I talked like everything, because I hoped to get him a little bit interested, so he wouldn't fuss over the bills if Edna bought all the stuff she's liable to buy when we open up. He said he'd bring Mrs. Warren in to see us when they drove up in November."

The house-boy came to raise the awning and they paused in their talk to watch him labor at the great crank-handle. The awning folded back in a deep crease against the timbered wall and let out the stars in a pale flock upon the fields of the darkening sky.

"My word, I forgot to lock the little door of the library! I was so het up over the coming guests," she cried. "Let's amble over and repair the damage. Heaven send the Chief hasn't wandered in that direction! We'll finish our conference, ladies, in my rooms. That is, if the Chief doesn't throw me into the *oubliette* for malfeasance in office."

When Beefy had gone to her own rooms, the two friends walked across the campus under the twinkle of summer stars. Alice halted under the great sycamore.

"Do you remember that night in last May when your telegram came?" she asked in a low tone. "It was a pretty hard rap—on us both. I knew you were right not to take money, when it meant so much more to let your father have a long enough rest to get entirely well again but I was about knocked out, to be here without you." She paused and then went on more briskly. "I had a windfall last week. That legacy that was such a joke has come to life. I got fifty dollars. Profits from the Fruit Growers stock. I didn't mention it before Beefy; she's rolling in gold. This is just between us. If the Shop doesn't flourish, we'll share the orange money, you and I."

Carol groped for words. When she was deeply touched, she could not speak easily.

"It isn't much," Alice added. "It will help, though."

"I wish I had as much to give," murmured Carol, with a hand on Alice's arm. "I'll do my part of the work with all my heart, of course, but I haven't any hard cash. I wish, oh, I wish I had. Even my money from Mr. Hoyt won't be due till the end of the month. And I daren't touch that. I wish I could find out who took the spoons. . . ."

She stopped in dismay. She had let the cat out of the bag. The thought of the reward that Mr. Hoyt had offered for the return of the lost spoons had danced before her, blinding her to what she was saying. She hoped Alice hadn't noticed.

"Spoons, what spoons?" asked Alice. "You haven't said a word about spoons. Whose were they? What have they to do with your college expenses?"

Carol hesitated. She knew Alice to be absolutely reliable. As secret as the grave, Beefy had complained more than once when she had failed to wheedle some information out of her paragon. "You won't ever tell anyone, not anyone on earth?" she asked earnestly. "If it ever came out that I had told . . ."

Alice's earnest assurances soothed her but, later, when Alice was asleep beside her, she felt a sharp regret. "I'll never learn to think before I speak," she thought, twisting her head on the pillow. "I'm untrustworthy, that's what I am."

And in her deep remorse she fell asleep and slept like a rock until Alice shook her out of cheerful dreams. In the sunshine, with a good breakfast to sustain her, and in the gaiety of the summer morning, she did not feel oppressed by her lapse. She and Alice had a delightful hour all to themselves in Alice's room before Alice sighted Warren's car waiting on the drive before Main.

"Here's your note-book and pencil, and remember that you're to snap up any likely designs that you see. I'm a dub on original stuff, you know," Alice said, as she stood with her hand on the door-knob. "Listen and don't be craning your neck towards the window. That horn isn't your friends' car. It's Beefy's new express-wagon. She's got it down there to impress the Dean. If you happen to go through New York, take a squint in at Longman's or any other expensive shop, the expensiver, the better."

"Yessum," replied Carol with affected meekness. "We don't go through the Great Metropolis, though. Mrs. Warren hates to be dragged by traffic."

"Well, *if* you go," Alice insisted. "Now run along. I'll see you as far as I can." She locked the door and started downstairs beside Carol.

On the second step she halted, grasped Carol's arm in the approved detective-drama style and hissed in her ear, "It was a woman who stole that stuff."

Carol laughed. "Perhaps you were the woman," she mocked. "Give it up and we'll share the reward."

"It's the little woman who stands at the bottom of the ladder to push strong men aloft, you know," Alice grinned at her own fanciful suggestions. "*Cherchez la femme.*" She turned suddenly serious. "It's real. I actually do have a feeling that a woman stole those things. Hush, here comes our silent partner. Let's introduce her to your Warrens and sic her on the Character Jewelry line. We may land another order for a necklace for Edna; she loves to be in the swim, you know."

There was no chance for salesmanship, however. Mr. Warren's tooth had grown so much worse that he was headed full speed for his old family dentist in New York. "I won't go back to that chap in Germantown," he vowed. "He's an unfeeling butcher. I'll go to Dr. Collins. He may be old but he's got a heart."

CHAPTER XIII

STRANDS OF THE WEB

FREDERICK PARSONS looked out of his porthole at a heaving grey sea. There had been no rain, only a turbulent continuous motion that the steward who tended him in his cabin called a sea-storm. He was extremely tired of this sea-storm. If it would only calm down to the normal roll of a steamer, he could get up on deck.

"I've had one great piece of luck," he thought as he looked at himself in the mirror over the wash-basin. "I've kept clear of mental fogs. There hasn't been a moment, a waking moment, that I can't account for. I believe I am out of the woods. Once I'm on solid land again . . ."

And about this same hour, Mr. Hoyt came from the barn at The Hermitage walking slowly, without his crutches. He found the Major had just come in and he answered his question absently.

"No, I haven't had any reply from that advertisement. We can't hope too much. In a week perhaps ——"

"Hm-m," returned the Major, from the depths of his favorite armchair. "No doubt. In the meantime, what about those scoundrels? Are you going to let them dispose of their loot without making an effort to get them? It's the last time I ask you, for I'm off this very moment. I've delayed a whole hour, waiting for you to come in. Let me call up the Station."

Hoyt put up a long firm hand. "Not yet," he demurred. "I'll wait another week. If nothing turns up by that time, I'll let you shout it on the housetops, if you like. Where are you off to this time?"

"I see. You think they'll have got rid of the stuff and it'll be more easily traced. You are a simple-minded chap, Alan," remarked the Major, as he rose and held out his hand. "Well, I've got to be at the Lotus Club at one sharp. I'll have to put on speed. And sixty an hour isn't good for an old chap like me. You'll be the death of me yet, Alan Hoyt."

He passed Claire as he went, and greeted her kindly. He still thought her a snip, but a snip in sorrow was someone to be helped, in spite of personal prejudice.

"I've got the half promise of a good position for you," he paused to tell her. "An elderly lady, a friend of mine, wants a clever secretary for the winter. A social secretary, she called it. Lots of entertaining and pretty clothes. Suit you down to the ground. She's to call me up when she gets back to town next week. She'll be at Narragansett for the rest of the season and might take you on up there."

Claire thanked him as well as he would let her and then, when he was dashing down the drive in his little car, she turned to Mr. Hoyt. She wore a half sad, half pleading look, and spoke in her gentlest voice.

"I've been worrying a lot about the things you—lost," she said and she came close to Hoyt's chair.

Her sea-blue eyes were as clear as a baby's and there was an appealing air of helplessness about her. "I have thought about it day and night. I knew there must be some way to find out who took the things."

Hoyt looked up at her sharply. He didn't understand girls and this one had always been a puzzle to him. She was a good secretary, quick at typing and made but few mistakes, yet she seemed rather empty-headed in other ways. "Well, what have you discovered?" he asked in a neutral tone.

Claire flung out her pink palms in a deprecatory gesture. "It has been perfectly dreadful for me," she murmured, desolate and timid as a lost bird. "I hardly could believe it when I first began to suspect . . ."

"Suspect whom?" Hoyt tore through her hesitations with his impatient authority. "Speak out, please, and tell me at once."

Claire drew herself up. "You will believe what I am going to tell you, Mr. Hoyt, when I say I have made two discoveries. Two. The first one is this," and she held out an old-fashioned gold ring with a large ruby in it.

Hoyt leaned forward and stared at the ring. "My mother's engagement ring!" he exclaimed. "The ruby ring!"

He took it from her and examined it, his eyes shining and his voice deep with emotion. "Thank God," he muttered. "He did not take it. I knew he couldn't do such a thing. Miss Burk, I cannot tell you how grateful I am. Where did you find it?"

Claire took a deep breath. "I was hunting about," she began.

"Wait a bit," he interposed. "I want someone else to hear this." He rose with some difficulty and touched the button on the leg of the wicker table. "It is only right they should hear the whole story from your lips," he said, as he sat down.

Mrs. Biggs appeared, wiping her hands on her flowered apron and Alpheus was not far behind her. They looked somewhat disappointed when Hoyt told them that the ring had been found and that Miss Burk was going to tell them exactly how she had found it.

"I thought it was the sp——" Alph's mumble was cut short by his wife, and the two waited in a rather chilly silence as Claire began her recital. It was plain that Mrs. Biggs would have preferred any other to have been the lucky one.

"I had the idea, just after you had recovered consciousness, Mr. Hoyt, that the things you said were stolen might not be far away. I thought they might even be in the house." She did not pause to refute the indignant protest from Biggs and his wife. "No one else knew what you had in the safe. Even I didn't know and don't know, except that there were some valuable silver spoons. The person who had seen the spoons . . ."

"Who are you talkin' about?" broke out Biggs, violently. "Are you a-sayin' I'm a thief? The Missis never laid eyes on them spoons and that lets her out. Me a thief——"

"Wait a moment, Biggs." Mr. Hoyt was coolness itself. "We are hearing Miss Burk's version of how she found the ruby ring. Let her go on."

"I had seen the fan, though, and the card that went with the fan," continued Claire in as composed a tone. "There is a person in this house who needs money—even the Major knew that—a person who has gone off on a trip, a person whose room was the only one that was not locked on the night of the robbery ——"

"You aren't accusing Miss Breck?" exclaimed Hoyt, startled in spite of himself. "Miss Breck!"

Claire flushed deeply but was not shaken. "I hate to suggest it but I believe she is at the bottom of it. I've watched her closely and she behaves queerly when she thinks she is alone. That talk of hers about noticing that there wasn't any dust on the tower window-sill sounds like a fairy tale to me. She was the only one up in the tower that day, and she could dust the sill all right, if she'd left any marks of her hands there when she was spying out of the window. There were her marks on the upper sill."

She looked about in triumph. The absolute silence that greeted her amazing revelation gave her confidence. "She told me that she and her chum at college were going to open a sort of antique shop, and I think she's taken the spoons up there with her."

"That part of your accusation is nonsense." Hoyt spoke sternly. "Miss Breck is not quite an idiot, and no one in their senses would attempt to sell those spoons in an ordinary shop. You do not know what you are saying, Miss Burk."

"She didn't haf to snoop about to learn the inside of things here, neither," snorted Biggs in wrath. "She knows the lay of the land from the inside."

"And that lock on her door *is* tricky," spoke up Mrs. Biggs. "I've tried it myself and I spoke to Alph about it. The very day after the robbery I tried it and it was . . ."

Claire tossed her golden head and her lips tightened.

"Be careful, Miss Burk," Hoyt warned the excited girl. "If this fantastic story of yours turns out to be a figment of your own brain, it will not be pleasant for you here at The Hermitage."

Claire looked around the little circle of incredulous faces. She drew herself up and her eyes flashed. "I may have made some mistakes, and I may not be as clever as this wonderful Miss Breck," she said, in offended dignity. "But I don't hide things like this in my desk."

She held out a small card with typed names and dates on it.

"I found it under the blotter in her desk," she said. "And you may remember, Mr. Hoyt, that she herself told you when we were all talking it over, that the Major sent her upstairs for the calendar-slip where you had written down the combination of the safe."

Meanwhile Carol, all unconscious of what was going on at The Hermitage, tucked her note-book into her bag and smiled at Mrs. Stoner who had offered to accompany her to the showrooms of Longman and Company. "I've only two pages left but that will be enough, I think," she said.

The three of them stood on the steps of the Library, about to separate for a short time. Mr. Warren was up in the twenty-ninth story of the Silberg Building under the skillful hands of Dr. Collins' first assistant, and would join them later.

"I don't think I'll go down to Longman's with you after all," Mrs. Stoner said. "It's so exhausting to do a lot of sight-seeing and the Library has about done me up. I'll stay with Mrs. Warren and look around the shops here. I need a new dress, and the frocks are so attractive. It'll be a rest after all those books."

Mrs. Warren was pleased with this arrangement. "We'll meet at the Purple Cream-Jug at one sharp," she said, as they started down the steps. "Mr. Warren hates tea-rooms but I'm bound to see this new place. Edna Cara says it's the cutest thing in New York. We'll get a table and if you're a trifle late, it won't matter so much."

Carol went off through the hurrying crowds. She wished she had not agreed to Alice's suggestion about going to Longman's. She had enough designs to choose from. Her mind went back to The Hermitage as she walked along. "I wonder how Claire is to-day," she thought. "She seems a lot better these last few days. Mr. Hoyt has been so good, and the Major, too. He's trying to get a job for her. I wonder if she still thinks he is a crab?"

She had a slight shock of surprise as she waited on the curb for the traffic signal. Two men passed, coming from around the corner. One of them was a small, insignificant, seedy looking individual and the other was Claire's Cousin Dick.

"It's the same man who wanted to know about Claire's Aunt Julia. He must be a relative, for he said he wanted to hear the news from home. They've evidently come up here again, so I suppose it's settled now, and Claire will be all right. Perhaps they are making arrangements . . ."

She almost wished she had halted Cousin Dick, but when she thought it over, she decided it was better she had not. She was a stranger, who was not supposed to know of Claire's private affairs.

She halted on the threshold of Longman's, to get out her note-book and turn to the blank pages. She did not want to waste any time, if she found any novelty in which Alice might be interested. A newspaper clipping fluttered to the pavement and she stooped to recover it. She had torn it from the newspaper just before she started from The Hermitage yesterday morning. It had been a surprise to her, for Mr. Hoyt had vowed he would take no immediate steps in regard to the spoons, when the Major had again urged the police.

It read:

> "Lost—in transit somewhere between Warrington, Pa., and Philadelphia, a small package containing some old silver spoons. A liberal reward will be given for the return of the package. No questions asked. Address Box 19, Warrington, Pa."

She put it back in her note-book with a little puzzled line between her straight brows. "Why should he be so certain he'll get them back? The thieves surely knew what they were taking, and they won't give them up so easily. Everybody is so mysterious about it—Mrs. Biggs, Alpheus and even Claire. I believe the Major and Mr. Hoyt are afraid that it was that same young man who stole the ruby ring, but they won't say a word. Claire didn't know Mr. Parsons, so she can't suspect him. I wonder whom she does suspect?"

She went inside the imposing establishment, and as she did so, she realized that her note-book was out of place. She couldn't copy designs here as she had at the Library. She'd have to remember them and put them down afterward. So she slipped her little green paper book in her bag and snapped the clasp.

As she raised her eyes, she stopped, with a little inarticulate cry. In the case before her was Mr. Hoyt's fan!

She went closer with a rapidly beating heart. A polite gentleman came forward to meet her and she plunged in without hesitation.

"The fan in the case there, is it for sale?" she asked, feeling that he must understand how tremendously excited she was. She hoped he would not become suspicious of her agitation.

"Yes, it is for sale," he told her, without appearing to see anything amiss in her voice or manner. "A genuine Watteau. A beautiful specimen, is it not? Would you like to see it more closely? If you are interested, I can let you ——"

She made a quick negative gesture. "Not yet, thank you," she said. "But have you any objection to telling me how much is being asked for it? I couldn't buy it myself but I know someone who is very much interested in fans. They were talking only a few days ago about a fan like this, with the Venus in a blue robe. I should like them to see it."

He told her the sum—thousands—and she put it down on the blank page of the note-book resurrected from her bag for the purpose. "That's a good deal, isn't it?" she commented, absorbed in writing the figures clearly. "Who owns it? These friends of mine might want to buy it. I don't know."

"The Princess Bulono, an Italian, who is stopping at the Windham at present. She is extremely anxious to sell the fan so that she may return to her mother in Italy. The mother, I understand, is failing rapidly."

Carol hesitated a moment. "Might I see the fan now, in my own hands? I'll be very careful. I'd like to look at the *brins* more closely." She was thankful she could appear so expert. "I can see the *panache* quite well but it is different with the smaller decorations. I should have to describe it thoroughly."

The agreeable salesman had seen the sketches in the note-book and felt the sincerity of her eyes and voice, and he was anxious for the sale. In this dull season, it was well to see business move. "Surely," he replied. "I will get Mr. Sampson's key at once."

Mr. Sampson came with his key and the two stood beside her as she took the delicate fan in careful fingers and turned it about, examining it closely. It was exactly like Mr. Hoyt's fan, save that the Venus wor a blue robe instead of a red one. Could it be that this was Mr. Hoyt's heirloom, transformed by the skillful hands of the expert counterfeiter? That had been her wild hope when she asked to have it out of the case. As she bent over it she had to confess to herself that she must be on an entirely wrong scent.

She gave it back with a little sigh. "It *is* a beauty. How long has it been on exhibition? There hasn't been any notice in the papers. We take both the *World* and the *Times*."

"No, we haven't advertised. The connoisseurs generally know of all these things from inside information," Mr. Sampson told her, as he put the fan back on its velvet cushion, and locked the case. "We have had a number of inquiries about it, and it may be sold at any moment now. It has been with us on show in that case for quite a while. On the twelfth, wasn't it, Mr. Montague? Yes, on the twelfth. Anything else you would like to know? We will be glad . . . the Princess Bulono? The Windham. Rather far down town but the Princess is not exactly in funds just now. In fact, she is forced to sell."

Carol's heart fluttered. It was risking a good deal. Yet she must get at the truth. "Do you think she would mind telling me its history?" she asked with her eyes on the Watteau fan. "I am so interested, and if I can persuade my friends to be interested, too, they might want it. I'll have to know all about it, though. I'm not up on fans."

"The Princess is rather an invalid, but I feel assured she would do all she could to further the sale," Mr.

Sampson said, as he ushered her towards the entrance. "I can call her up, if you like, and say you are coming. If you will wait here . . ."

He came back to her with polite assurances. "The Princess will be most happy. She is suffering from a headache but is delighted to give any information. Any information," he repeated cordially as he escorted her to the pavement. "Let us know if your friend is interested. The fan will not be on display after to-day. The Princess is taking it home with her and she is leaving to-morrow."

She went down the crowded avenue much perturbed. Should she call the Major over the telephone and tell him about this fan? Though it had not turned out to be the stolen Watteau, it still was a Watteau, and no doubt that fan he had declared he would buy. "I'd buy it and laugh at your red-robed Venus," he had said on the occasion of the birthday supper.

"I'll call him, though it will take a lot of money," she decided. "I hope he is at home. I'd better try a person-to-person call. Then I shan't have to pay so much if he isn't home."

The operator in the hotel where she had stopped to 'phone, told her that the Major was not at the Crow's Nest but could be got at one o'clock at the Lotus Club. "Shall I call the Club? It is almost one," she asked. "No? Perhaps you'd rather wait. There is a fashion-show going on in the Pink Room."

Carol thanked her and paid the fifteen cents charge with alacrity. She had saved more than half a dollar, since she could get the Major right here in New York, and half dollars were worth saving. It was a lucky beginning.

"And now I must hurry," she thought, with a little thrill. "I can get to the Windham before one, I think, and then I can tell the Major more about the fan."

She walked rapidly along the few blocks that led to the Avenue where the small hotel was located but hurry as she might she could not make it. One o'clock sounded from a nearby church tower and all the clocks in store windows confirmed the hour.

"I might miss the Major if I wait," she thought, and went into a drug-store where a row of telephone booths was visible through the window.

She remembered her appointment with the Warrens and decided to call them first. "I have to stay over for a while," she explained, after the Purple Cream-Jug had secured that lady from the flock of customers at the tables. "I am so sorry. You have been awfully nice to me and I hate to miss going back with you." She added, almost automatically, "I hope you'll be in to see our shop when you come up again in November."

Mrs. Warren was very nice about it. To tell the truth, she was just as well pleased. Mr. Warren was not at his best after a visit to the dentist, even when the dentist was Dr. Collins, and she thought a young girl ought to have a livelier companion than a middle-aged man with an aching jaw.

Then Carol got the Major who had just come in to the Club. His voice sounded slightly tart. His first remark was that he had no time to spend on fiddle-faddles. When he heard all that she had to say, however, he forgot his irritation.

"I'll go down and look it over," he said. "You run along and see the Italian lady. If you aren't going back with those friends of yours, you might go with me. I've got my car here and I'll be leaving about five o'clock."

"And now," said Carol to herself with a thrill as she hung up the receiver. "Now for the Princess Bulono. I do hope I shan't make a mess of it. I'll be very careful."

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRINCESS AND THE FAN

"*ENTREZ!* Come in!"

Carol turned the knob and obeyed the high shrill summons. She halted in surprise, for she had expected quite another sort of person.

The Princess Bulono was small and slight, almost too small and slight for such a high title. Her round, childish face with wide cheek bones and small grey, quick eyes gave her an odd look as of a precocious child, masquerading in the sophisticated garments of an Italian noblewoman. Her long earrings and the Parisian negligée were in the latest mode.

She welcomed Carol with cordiality, and apologized for the dimness of the room.

"You will pardon my indolence," she raised herself to a sitting posture from among her cushions and extended her hand in a gracious gesture. "It is fortunate for me that I am able to see you. Often I am stretched on my back in a dark cool room. Ah, these headaches. But now I am quite recovered, yes."

Carol took the hand extended to her, noting as she did so, the strangely marked nails—deep half-moons of white at the base of the nails that the pink enamel could not hide—and thanked the little lady for her kindness in receiving her.

"I am only just hoping to interest some friends of mine in your lovely fan," she confessed as she took the chair indicated by a wave of the be-ringed hand. "They may not even get down to see it. I know I am asking a great deal when I say I should like to know something of its history."

"Surely, surely. You should learn of its history," murmured the Princess, passing a hand over her forehead. "We must have our good doctor in for that. It fatigues me, yes, greatly," she went on with half-closed eyes. "Dr. Scarelli will be delighted to be of service to so beautiful an American lady. Will you press the button there on the wall beside the door? Thanks. The doctor will also be happy to advertise the Bulono fan; he is devoted to our family. In fact, *mio madra* refused to allow me to leave her unless our faithful Scarelli accompanied me."

She smiled at Carol in the friendliest manner and her whole expression was one of open candor and good will. Carol, however, had the sensation of coming up against a barrier when she looked into the Princess Bulono's eyes. There was surface without depth; no admission behind those baffling eyes.

After the bell-boy had gone in search of Dr. Scarelli, the Princess turned again to Carol. "Believe me, dear young American lady, I am glad, yes, thankful to tell all that is to be told about the Watteau. Ah, this vulgar money, but you see," and she waved a hand to exhibit the apartment, "the cage in which we must pine. It speaks for itself. After our palace in Rome . . . But we must not speak of that, while my adored *madra* is lying on her bed awaiting our return with the patience of a true saint."

Here she was interrupted by the arrival of the family physician. Dr. Scarelli came in with a quick bow and an anxious face. He had a stiff, prim manner of walking.

"You are worse, Madame," he asked in halting English. "You have sent for me. Yet you are sitting upright. You smile."

The Princess explained in rapid Italian for which she apologized. "Our Scarelli understands slowly in any other than his native tongue. He is shy, you see."

Truly the doctor appeared overcome by the task that had been set him. He was a slim, vigorous man of about forty-five, with some grey threads among his black hair and lines about his dark, piercing eyes. On his forehead was a deep groove worn by much pondering over weighty problems and his manner was serious and conventional. A prepossessing man, with good hands and thin, long fingers.

"You speak the French, perhaps?" he asked wistfully. "Yes? No? Not enough for the quick conversation? Ah? I regret. I am awkward in the swift English that you speak. But some words you will of your goodness supply."

He asked some questions first; gentle inquiries about herself and her work, which she answered readily enough as she had nothing to conceal as to her own affairs. She told them she had just come from Poughkeepsie and what her errand had been. Since she was in pursuit of information about the Bulono family heirlooms, she must prove herself a genuine seeker after such knowledge. She mentioned Alice and the Dean but kept the names of all the others out of the discussion; she did not trust herself after her weakness in disclosing the robbery to Alice.

"It is a great happiness to aid the *signorina* in her studies," remarked Dr. Scarelli, with a bow. "Thees fan, yes, she is long in the Bulono family, as you shall hear."

Carol got out her note-book and scribbled away as he told in his stumbling phrases of the purchase of the fan from Watteau himself by the fifth Princess of Bulono, the great beauty who had all Rome at her feet; how the mother of the Princess Elena had refused to be parted from it until the Princess Elena had gone on her knees and wept.

"That good daughter brought other treasure, ah, some picture by our great Titian, to sacrifice," he said with a sad shake of his head. "We have come and we must go, it is the Fate. Is there more that I can relate of history to the fan?"

Carol thanked him warmly. "I think that is enough," she said, as she closed her note-book. "If one knows when it was bought and where it has been since, that is about all an amateur like me needs to know. You say you have a receipt in Watteau's writing to show, if anyone wants to see it?"

"Any purchaser, dear lady," amended Dr. Scarelli, with a bow. "It is not facile to produce that paper. In the basement of the Princess' trunk. Yes. It will be produced. If requested by purchaser. Thanks, a *millefois,* for your visitings. Ah, it is as I feared, our Lady Elena has overtaxed herself. You will excuse her weakness? She will be chagrined."

Carol found herself in the corridor without knowing how she had gotten out of the apartment. She felt ashamed of herself.

"I ought to have seen that she was tired," she thought as she went down in the creaking elevator. "I was so interested in the history of the fan, though, when I come to think of it, there isn't so much to that history. Just a few names . . . well, I've done the best I can. Now for Longman's again. I'm to wait there for the Major, he said. I wonder what he'll think of the fan?"

If Carol could have looked back into the room she had just left she would have seen a surprising recovery in the sufferer from headache, for the Princess got up with a lithe movement that was almost a spring. She took off the black smooth waves of hair that gave her such a distinctive appearance and ran her thick white fingers through her short red locks.

"That's all right," she remarked. "But we'll just follow up along that line. Get busy with the house-operator, Bud. We're going to talk with that assistant librarian. We can't risk any bluffs."

Dr. Scarelli rose obediently from the chair into which he had dropped. "Better let me do the talking," he said, as he took up the receiver. "You are laid up with a headache, you know."

She came over to the table and took the receiver out of his hand with a quick gesture. "You *are* an innocent, for all your training, Harry," she remarked coldly. "I am calling from The Hermitage. I want to ask Miss Breck to bring me some silk stockings from Lord and Taylor's summer sale. I'm that Claire thing."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Lew told us that girl was going to leave. It's a risk."

"Risk's my middle name," she flashed back. "Lew told us, too, that this girl was going straight to Poughkeepsie and back, yet here she is. Hush . . . yes, this is Room 40. I want to get Poughkeepsie . . . Vassar College . . . yes."

When she had finished talking in a low, deep unnatural voice, she hung up with a flourish. "Miss Whelen says that Miss Breck left earlier than she had expected, because of Mr. Warren's tooth. She was sorry she could not deliver the message. So now we can sit pretty till old Walton sends in his check. He'll buy it. He's dippy on fans. And this one is a peach."

"I did my best on it," the man remarked gloomily. "It's too small a job to keep us hanging about here for two weeks though. If those two other operations were closed, I'd leave you to finish it up by yourself."

Carol, utterly oblivious, went her way and came to the store where she was ushered to a secluded chair where she spent her time pondering until Major Walton came into the private room where she waited. He was talking with the courteous salesman.

"Yes, it has been a good while since I bought any old stuff," he was saying, in an offhand way. "Habit is a bad thing, though, it gets you when you least expect it. If Miss Breck hadn't described it, I suppose I'd not troubled my head about it. It was the description of the painting that got me."

"The young lady seems to be quite a connoisseur," smiled the salesman. "She uses the technical terms. Shall I have Mr. Sampson open the case at once? You spoke of being in a hurry."

While he was gone, the Major bent towards her. "Don't be surprised at anything I do. If I ask you to jump over the moon, jump!"

He took the fan from Mr. Sampson, and examined it closely, turning it about to scrutinize it in every light. He kept muttering as if to himself. "Yes, the blue robe. The border of roses. It has the Watteau touch." He looked up at the smiling salesman. "This must be the fan I've been looking for these ten years, Montague. Great luck. I suppose they want too much for it?"

Mr. Montague named the sum and the Major whistled but got out his check-book. Mr. Sampson smiled down on him like a father as he stood beside the Major with the fan in his hands watching the pen speed over the paper. Carol was on pins and needles. She had expected some delay, some investigation of the documents that were stored in the bottom of the Princess' trunk.

The Major appeared to have forgotten her existence. He never even glanced in her direction. After he had written the date and check-number, he paused. "Princess Elena Bulono?" he asked. "That's the full name.

How do you spell the last name? Sounds better the way you say it. I'd be apt to make it too much like *bologny,*" and he laughed as if at a good joke. The other two men smiled politely. The Major wrote the name and then again withheld his pen.

"Is that absolutely the bottom price?" he demanded. "Is this lady within reach? I'd like to see if she'll drop a bit. It's pretty stiff, even for a genuine Watteau."

Mr. Montague undertook the task. He used the desk 'phone and had the good luck to find the Princess in her apartments. The Major listened impatiently. "Let me talk to her," he said, almost rudely. "I'm the one who has to pay, you know."

"She has already agreed to a reduction of a hundred dollars." Mr. Montague resigned the 'phone gracefully, and withdrew to the other side of the room where he studied the uncut emeralds in a small case. He was a gentle, well-bred man, who had lived for years surrounded by works of art, and he liked to please customers.

Carol thought the Major might as well have let Mr. Montague finish the transaction, for he hung up almost at once. "A hundred is better than nothing," he remarked as he took up his pen and began to write. "She says their messenger will send the papers—the history and a receipt—over when he comes for the check. She is as business-like as I am. I want to get away as soon as possible. My friends are waiting for me over at the Lotus Club."

Mr. Sampson and Mr. Montague agreed. They were equally anxious to make short work of the sale. When the messenger from the Princess arrived with the papers, he found them all waiting for him, ready and smiling. Carol had withdrawn into another smaller room where a lovely hand-made silver necklace had caught her eye, and she was hanging over the case in an effort to memorize the design when she caught a glimpse of the man.

He wore a blue uniform with buttons and red cording on it and held a cap of the same colors in his hand. He looked trim and brisk but Carol recognized him. He was the same man she had seen with Cousin Dick earlier in the day.

"I'm glad he didn't see me," she thought and moved farther from the doorway. She was confused by the meeting of this same man in a porter's uniform so soon after seeing him in his shabby every-day clothes. She would not turn about until the whole transaction was concluded and the man had gone. Then she recovered her common sense. "He doesn't know me, and he didn't see me on the street, either. Even Mr. Carter didn't notice me when they passed; he was looking the other way. But it is odd, to meet him twice in so short a time. He must work in the hotel where the Princess is stopping. I don't remember what sort of uniform the bell-boys and porters there wore."

She went slowly to the table where the Major still sat. He glanced up at her with a friendly look and there was relief in his eyes. "I've asked Montague and the other gentleman to allow me a few moments to gloat over this find," he said with a dancing light in his eyes. "Even a man in haste to keep a luncheon engagement needs to gratify himself in an event of this sort. Don't you think so?"

She murmured some response, watching him with a puzzled brow, as he put his hand in his breast pocket and brought out a small bottle, removed the cork, tilted the phial against the small tip of the handkerchief he held in his other hand, and bent over the fan which lay spread out on the table before him.

Carol drew close. She began to understand, though she uttered no word. She knew he was going to make a test.

"Ah, it is as I thought," the Major rolled his unoccupied eye up at her in triumph. The microscope in his other eye gave him a grotesque look. "It's Hoyt's fan, you know."

He pointed out to her the blob of red paint that the artist had dropped in the heart of one of the tiny roses of the fourth garland and had liked too well to erase.

"That was the first thing I saw," he went on rapidly. "If this had been the other, the legendary fan with the blue Venus, it would not have had that blob of red paint. Then there are five roses in the first garland and six in the next three. And, as you see," and he gave the microscope to her, "there is the place where I mended it under the bouquet on the middle *brin*. After I had seen the blob of paint I was sure, but it is necessary to demonstrate to others."

She dropped the microscope from her eye as she saw the spot where he had drawn the moist handkerchief across the Venus' blue robe only a moment ago.

It was no longer blue. A spot of bright red had appeared where the liquid had touched the robe.

"It *is* Mr. Hoyt's fan, and they are the thieves!" she cried. "Oh, what are you going to do?"

CHAPTER XV

HARE AND HOUNDS

"I'VE decided to leave the fan here with you, Mr. Sampson," the Major said, as he rose from the desk. "I'll drop back for it later. Shouldn't want to carry it about with me, and my bank is out of my way just now. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Perfectly, Major," replied the affable Mr. Sampson and he took charge of the fan. "You will be in for it in a few hours, I suppose? Before closing time."

"Surely before closing time," the Major assured him as he took up his hat and stick. "Well, good-bye, gentlemen. I trust you get your commission as promptly as I got the fan. By the way, isn't that rather unusual? I thought the firm received all the money from a sale and deducted its commission before it turned over the owner's share."

"Yes, that is the usual custom but the Princess stipulated that we allow her to receive the whole sum. She has sent us her check for the commission, you see, and we are quite secure." He held out the slip of tinted paper that held the Princess' signature, an amazing scrawl in faint ink. "The messenger delivered it to me while you were admiring your purchase. He seemed as eager to pay up as if he were to benefit by it. Mr. Montague and I had this check, in fact, before yours had been put in his hands. An honest fellow. Evidently one of the Bulono retainers."

"Though he didn't have an Italian look," Mr. Montague remarked. "That is, the look of a typical Italian. There are thousands of them who don't."

The Major glanced at the check as Mr. Sampson put it among others to be sent to bank. "You have it all settled now." He was jovial. "Are you quite sure, though, that you'll get the money? Princesses in these republican days aren't what they used to be."

"Quite sure," Mr. Sampson smiled, amused at his customer's humor. "We have had small checks from her before. She has bought a number of inexpensive articles, gifts for her mother, and we've never had a check returned."

They parted in high good humor and the Major was still chuckling as he went across the pavement to a low grey car, with a long sleek body, a New York license tag and a chauffeur in grey livery.

"Hop in," he said to Carol. "It's time we were moving along."

The chauffeur touched the rim of his cap in military salute, as he received his instructions. "Yes, sir. I know the place," he said. "You'll be there in two minutes, Major."

"Hold on," exclaimed the Major. "I forgot. Drive to the Thingummy Tea-rooms, that place opposite the Boxing Club. I've got to have a cup of tea before I make my calls."

Carol wondered though she asked no questions. They left the car at the corner of the street and went into the Lily May Tea-room, two doors from the corner. The Major chose a table close to the thin net curtains that screened the wide windows. He ordered tea, though it was the hour for luncheon, and he sat with his eye on the opposite side of the street. Carol could not resist her curiosity, though she knew he would be annoyed.

"Why are you watching that Boxing Club?" she asked, as the waitress went off for their order. "Are they . . ."

"You need a map of the city, young woman," he interrupted her with a chuckle. "The Boxing Club is directly back of the Windham and if that precious friend of yours tries to sneak away, she'll go by the back way. She will have turned in my check by this time, if my reckoning holds good."

"And you are going to stop them!" she cried softly. "You aren't going to let them get away with all that money. Of course! It was stupid of me not to understand. I see."

He chuckled at that. "I'm glad you do. It proves what an astute young person you are," he remarked. "Here, pour this tea for me. I'm about starved. Bring another order of muffins—no, never mind. We must be off."

Carol started at the abrupt change in his voice. She caught up her bag and followed him. She did not even stop for the change that should have been given from the note the Major had flung down, but hurried out after him. She bumped into him in the small hallway. He had stopped to peer through the lace panel of the door at a man who was hurrying out of the Boxing Club.

The man was slim and wiry. He was dressed in linen knickers and carried a golf-bag. He walked with an odd movement. As though one ankle was stiff.

"That's the man," she whispered and she clutched the Major's arm. "That's the man I saw that night. He ran just like that."

He did not reply but opened the door for her to pass out. The man had stopped at the basement door of the Boxing Club and was talking with someone inside, so that his back was turned as they made their escape to the street and around the corner to the waiting car. Carol saw him turn, just as they got safely into the car, and her heart sank. "He'll see us," she thought. "He is the sort that never misses anything, I feel certain."

The man in linen knickers, however, did not see them. He was occupied with other things,—a small brown machine which halted at the curb and a small old woman who came down the steps with faltering gait. He rushed to help her down and his devotion was pleasant to see. The passers-by, if they noticed the two figures, felt a warmth at the heart, it was nice to see a man treat an old lady like that.

He put the frail old lady, who wore heavy old-fashioned mourning with a small face-veil, into the car, got in himself, signalled the driver and then reached over to pull down the back curtains. He was very careful of the old lady; the sun might be too strong for her.

"Step on it, Jack," said the Major. "We've got to catch up to that car."

The low grey car shot ahead, but at the next traffic signal they missed the green light. The little brown car was almost out of sight.

"They got a darned good bus," remarked the driver, genially. "But we ain't goin' to let any French car run away from us yet a while, Major. We'll get 'em."

They were off again, racing past trucks, street cars, wagons, skimming luxurious limousines, weaving in and out among the elevated piers, with the small brown car well in the lead, gliding like a tireless swift snake towards the less congested districts northward.

It was not until this moment that Carol made a discovery. The Major was entirely mistaken. "*But,*" she exclaimed, with a hand on his arm to make him listen. "Longman's said that fan had been there on exhibition more than two weeks—since the twelfth. It can't be Mr. Hoyt's fan."

He shook off her hand. "There they are up that next street, Jack. Can we loop around and catch them coming out? Try it, if there's a chance." He glared at her as he swept his gaze over to the opposite end of the street they were swinging into. "It's Hoyt's fan. I don't care if it's been there for a year. Don't talk nonsense. You'll need your breath."

They were in the narrow cross street now and the brown car was coming towards them. It swerved suddenly and disappeared into the open gates of a disused foundry yard. When they came up and halted in the gateway, the place was empty.

"That settles it," cried the Major, undaunted. "They know we're after them, and I know I'm going to catch them. What's the trouble, officer? Exceeding the speed limit? I'm after a gang of thieves, man, don't talk nonsense. Get in. We need you."

The policeman was young and of a sporting turn. He needed only a hint of who the quarry might turn out to be to convince him. "I'll just telephone ahead," he said. "Lucky we're at this corner. A small brown Renault, you say? They shan't get out of town, believe *me.*"

He was quick enough for them to be at the avenue again before the brown car had wormed itself through the alley-way, rounded the block and passed the traffic signal. Carol saw it just ahead racing among other machines, but he had seen it first. He dropped his cap on the floor and snatched the Major's light top-coat that lay on the back of the seat.

"I'm not goin' to advertise fer trouble," he said to the chauffeur. "They'll be plenty comin' this way without an invite. That feller at the wheel knows me. Step on it, brother, step on it good and hard. I'll flash my badge if any of the traffic squad tries to stop us."

Through another side street, up a broad avenue, around a corner, and then they were close upon it. They almost ran into the crowd that surrounded it. The small brown car had crashed into a truck and rammed into another machine in the rebound. The driver was crawling out of the bent door, as they came up.

The Major was first to push through the dense crowd. Carol stood up in the car and thrust her head out of the window, and she saw him come to a dead stop, stare, and frown. The young policeman in his full uniform was beside him. The chauffeur, Jack, was shouting questions, or looked as if he were. It was maddening not to know what was going on.

"I'm going out, in spite of the whole world," she said aloud. She was tremendously excited. She put her hand on the door-handle and then sat down. They were coming back.

The Major explained in a few words. "Not the same car. We must have missed them at that foundry-yard. It's a Renault but the driver swears he came straight from a garage on Eighth Avenue. He had a rush call for a patient of some Dr. Benson,—the officer knew the doctor, and he didn't know the driver. The man has collapsed. They are taking him to a hospital. Take us back to the Terminal, Jack. We've got to ship this young lady on the next train."

Carol sank back in the seat. There was nothing to say.

At the terminal the Major bought her ticket, and a sheaf of magazines and saw her into the train. "Better not say anything to Hoyt," he cautioned. "It might upset him."

"They got away, anyhow," she remarked, and immediately felt mortified at her lack of tact. The Major had surely done the best he could.

"Yes, they got away," he returned, as he glanced absently at his watch. "They didn't get away with my money, though. I ’phoned my bank to hold up any check of mine that might be turned in to-day. I knew they’d be quick if they weren’t square. I had to wait for a booth—the Club ’phones were most unnaturally busy—and that is why I was late.”

She looked at him with shining eyes. “You think of everything, I do believe. And I was so worried about all that money!”

“You’re a good girl, and you’ve done your bit,” he said. “You secured the only evidence we have—the jimmy and the man’s limping gait. I might have missed the man, if you hadn’t recognized him. I was looking for the woman.”

He paused as he was about to leave her.

“There is some trick about that accident,” he said firmly. “Whatever it is, though, it will come out sooner or later. You may have heard me tell that young policeman that they were the same gang that had worked the Standing Cup fraud, and he’ll have the whole city on their track. There’s a reward for their capture on that count, you may remember. No need to get ourselves mixed up in it. All I ask is to see them behind bars.” He suddenly smiled down on her. “Remember, not a word to Hoyt. We’ve got the fan but the spoons are still missing and the spoons are . . . By Jove, the train’s moving . . . . good-bye, good-bye . . .”

The Major would have been deeply interested in a car that was racing along one of the main highways of New Jersey. The conversation of the two occupants of the back seat of the taxi might have enlightened him on certain points where he was certainly much at sea.

The young woman was not in the happiest frame of mind and spoke freely. "I hope you're satisfied. I told you you ought to chuck old Harfleur the whole set and take the chances. He has done more ticklish jobs than that for us. He could feed all those twelve spoons one at a time to Dobrovsky and never get caught. Besides, we'll be over there in another week, and you could begin to trim them up, if he thought that was too risky."

"Oh, shut up. You talk too much," groaned her companion. "I'm hurt, I tell you. This foot—and it couldn't be the bad one; oh, no."

He bent to jerk angrily at the bandages he had improvised from his handkerchief and hers. His face was white with pain and, though the day was only moderately warm, his forehead was covered with sweat. The red-haired girl frowned at him.

"I told you it was too risky to jump in among that trash," she grumbled. "We could have managed some other way. That girl brought them after us, the smooth-faced thing! I mistrusted she wasn't what she pretended to be," her voice was shrill with venom. "I wish you'd done as I wanted you to when she came in to-day, it would have given us a chance."

"Can't you be still?" he snarled. "We've got to get to a doctor somewhere. I'm not going to lose this foot, no, not if I swing for it. Where are we, anyway?"

She leaned forward to try to find some familiar landmark, some recognized house or shop in the maze of drab, suburban streets they were threading. "Give it up," she answered carelessly. "It might be Somerville or it might be Morristown. I don't know which way we're taking."

She rapped on the glass and the driver cocked his ear. "Where are we, Johnny?" she asked.

"We wuz in Somerville but we'll be in the jug if you don't lay low," he replied, with a gesture to an approaching motorcycle, seen far down the road, coming towards them at a leisurely rate.

She sank back and pulled the curtain a little lower. It would not do to draw it too low on this shady side of the car. Those State Police were nosy guys. You couldn't be too careful.

The motorcycle drew near, came abreast of them, and passed. Evidently the fresh-faced Corporal saw only a nondescript taxi, probably from the railroad station in Somerville taking its fare to a nearby farm —city relatives coming out to work their country cousins for a vacation on the farm.

"Now beat it!" cried the girl over the lowered glass partition. "Don't you stop till we get to Philly, no matter what Harry says. He's going nuts about his foot but he'll have to stick it out. Hit her up to the limit, Johnny. There'll be plenty in it for you."

The man nodded and drove more rapidly, while the girl began to fumble with a bag she picked up from the floor of the car. She gave an exclamation that caused the suffering man to look towards her.

"We've got the other stuff, the diamonds and the bonds all right," she whispered. "But there's only six of the spoons. The one with the priest on it is gone."

Even in his consternation, the man could not endure her ignorance. "Priest?" he echoed contemptuously. "I've told you a dozen times that spoon is called the Master spoon. Are you sure it's gone? Look again."

He watched her closely, not sure that she was not deceiving him. "If you think you'll get away with it alone, you're mistaken, my girl," he added grimly. "You and I stick together as long as we're on this side of the pond, remember that."

He had to believe her at last, and he sank back on the cushioned seat with a groan. "Another score against us," he muttered. "If this foot were only whole——" He bent to grasp his ankle. "I tell you I've got to have a doctor," he broke out fiercely. "I won't go another mile."

She looked at him long enough to see that he meant it. "We'll drop out in Flemington," she returned quietly. "I know a hospital there. I've got an idea."

"A hospital in that burg?" he scoffed. "Try another. I don't swallow that bait."

"We can get to a hospital," she insisted and seeing that he was too weak to struggle against her will, she tapped on the glass and spoke to the chauffeur again.

"Stop at the first cross-street in Flemington, Johnny," she said. "There's a hospital on the corner there and we'll have to stop for an hour or so. You can go back. You needn't wait."

In the interval before they reached the town she spent her time sorting out the bills and change she had in her purse. She made a goodly pile for the driver's share. She knew there was no hospital on the corner of the cross-street, but she meant to get rid of Johnny before securing another driver. She'd take the chance of finding a hospital farther down the road.

CHAPTER XVI

SOME MINOR CHARACTERS

WHILE the discussion was being carried on with such heat in the taxi as it sped over the New Jersey highroad, Mr. Richard C. Carter sauntered out of the rear door of the old foundry where he had spent some days under the care of Shorty Smult, the confidential servant or helper of the two principals in the affair. He felt with great earnestness that it was good to be alone and free. He smiled at the fiasco he had witnessed from the back room of the foundry.

"Shorty said that some people were coming in to look over the foundry, iron people who might buy it, but he didn't shut my eye up. I recognized them," he thought comfortably. "Those two were lighting out, that's what it was. They expected to change their clothes and their car, and to hop off easily with the cash they'd got from—well, I don't get just what fake they'd worked to pull off a big sum—but anyway, they'd planned a smooth get-away without me seeing them, either. And it didn't work well. I've got a bit of evidence that may be of use to me, though."

He thought with a smile of the last half-hour before the brown Renault had rushed headlong into the old foundry. What chance whim had prompted him to poke into the corner by the cooling-trough? He had not dreamed of finding the hidden bundle. Had not known that there was any of their property in the building. Had not known to whom the bundle belonged even when he had opened it. Not until later. Lucky he had heard them coming, though. He had good ears. Shorty had yelled to him. Shorty thought he was in on the game. And the Princess had never noticed that he was over there in the dark. He had managed to slip into the next room.

"Quick work, that," he thought. "I had that bundle back in its place before she got there. If I had been a minute later, she'd have caught me. That spoon, though. It dropped out when I had it open and I never saw it till they'd gone."

The spoon, that had dropped out of the bundle when he had been surprised by the sound of the car in the foundry-yard, had been a puzzle to him. It must be of importance in some way or those two wouldn't have had it in their possession. He must keep it, well hidden of course, as a means of defending himself against the two, if they turned up again. He needed some such solid fact as the old silver spoon offered in his dealings with those crooks.

He walked along, trying to make up his mind what he should do next, now that he had regained his liberty. He walked lightly, jauntily, swinging a fine crook-necked cane that had been left behind in the exchange of cars and disguises. He felt rather well pleased with himself.

Inside the crook-necked cane, surrounded by a thick mass of yellow cornstarch which had been in a cream-puff that he had wheedled Shorty into bringing in to him early that morning, was the queer old spoon. By mere luck he had not eaten the cream-puff but saved it for his lunch; by another chance he had discovered only yesterday that the handle of Shorty's fine cane was hollow. It had taken him nearly an hour to find the way to remove the handle but it had been worth while, for he had found a hollow about six inches long where the spoon could be inserted. When the stiff custard was forced into the same space, he could shake the cane without producing the slightest sound.

"I always did like those knobby big canes," he thought. "There's style to them. If this had been a tenth of an inch smaller, the spoon wouldn't have gone in."

Then he turned his thoughts to his late employers. "They're a slick lot. I reckon they got off, in spite of that little mix-up. That girl is a wonder. I didn't know her in that widow-sort of rig. She certainly has nerve, the way she hopped out onto that mass of slag when the car skidded. That bonehead Shorty didn't calculate right. He's a poor driver. He ought to have slowed down. Brown got it, poor chap, pretty badly cut up—and it's his good foot, too. It's a wonder the car wasn't wrecked. They wouldn't trust him after that. Made him shoot off to a garage and they went in Johnny's bus . . ."

He could not decide in a hurry what course was the right one for him. He might go to Canada and start a decent life with good old Don; he might run down to Virginia and surprise his old uncle by taking hold of the farm; he might do a number of sensible things.

"I won't make up my mind in a rush," he thought, remembering how he had planned too hastily before, as he went along towards the avenue, swinging the cane. "I'll have something to eat and then it will be easier. I never could think on an empty stomach."

He felt so much better after he had a solid meal under his belt that he deferred decision. He dropped into a movie and saw a really good talking picture. Norma Shearer was a cracker-jack and no mistake. If there were only more girls like her in the world.

He did not notice the stalwart young policeman who was standing on the cigar-store corner as he came out after buying another pack of his favorite brand. He did not see the policeman nod to a sturdy man in a Sunday-black suit and square-crowned black hat and if he did he would have not seen anything strange in a country preacher—one of those Mennonite fellows—asking the way about.

If he had heard the conversation between the policeman and the preacher, he might have been interested.

"See that guy that's just come out of Bert's?" The officer's tone was low. "Keep an eye on him for a while, will you?"

"Got anything on him?" asked the Mennonite in the same low voice. "Want me to run him in?"

The other shook his head. He glanced in the opposite direction from that in which the blond young man was strolling with such an elegant air of leisure.

"Nothin' *yet*. I've got a hunch he's mixed up with those guys we're out for. He came out of the old shack a whiles ago. I've been keepin' tabs on him, but he's goin' off my beat. See where he goes, will you, and report to the chief, when you've got that dope."

"Sure," returned the other, genially. "I'll bet my hat he isn't a regular, he's too soft-lookin'. Looks like sorta a easy job to me. So long." A gesture from the other halted him. "Well?"

"You might take a look-see in on that there old foundry," the policeman jerked his head in the direction. "That party that was chasin' 'em said they give him the slip there. Get the dope on this feller and then when he's laid up fer the night, slip over and do the other trick."

The preacher grinned. "Looks like I'd have plenty of time," he remarked comfortably as he again started off. "That sort treats themselves good. He'll sleep soft, if he's been layin' around that dump, as you say he has."

"I didn't *say*," the officer muttered, as he turned to pace his beat. "I jest thought so. I ain't often mistaken. And then again, I have been onct or twict."

While these exciting events were taking place in this country—in a town in France a man looked about over his shoulder at the uncurtained square of dim window-panes and rose to draw the chintz folds close. Mr. Richard Carter had never seen nor would he ever see this man and yet the two of them had something in common; for this man, too, was puzzled over a matter of old spoons. In New York the sun was setting but here in France it was quite dark.

M. Harfleur sat at the desk of his office in a narrow old stone house in Mons and, although the night was warm, he shivered a little as he smoothed out the twenty crisp green notes that had arrived in a sealed box early that evening. He had been expecting a box from America but this box had surprised him. The twenty green notes were perfectly new, though slightly crumpled by having been thrust so carelessly into the paper box. He looked at them thoughtfully. He was a fleshy man with small, astonished eyes and a weak mouth; a man who could creep about on furtive errands with the effrontery of the true coward whose cruelty matches his fear.

"Why does he send these?" he thought, blinking. "Yes, to get me in trouble. I shall dispose of them, nevertheless. I am not spendthrift like those Americans. I know how to be safe."

He examined the notes with a microscope and stowed them in a particular section of his wallet. Then he read the letter again.

"So he's come back," he muttered. "He's found out how I got that legacy of Madame Parsons' Cousin Adelaide . . . yes, he must have discovered it . . . he has been in Lyons, beyond doubt . . . after ten years!"

He reread the letter, the disturbing letter that had been so carelessly thrust into the wrappings of the box that he might have overlooked it if he were of less cautious habit. He had read it twice before but he needed to convince himself afresh that it was a real ink-and-paper letter, and not a ghostly fancy of his own.

It was a short letter, with neither heading nor signature and was written on a piece of hotel-paper from which the printed corner had been torn off. It was written in a clear small hand and it read,—

> "After ten years I have discovered the man who defrauded my mother of her cousin's legacy. If you value that rat's life of yours, send back those six silver spoons you had from your friends now in the States. Unless you return the six spoons which are missing you will suffer for it. Send them to me, at The Fountain House, Doylestown, Penna., U. S. A. Do not delay. As the copy-books of your time used to say, *Delays are dangerous.*"

"I haven't any spoons of his," he muttered, as he folded the paper with shaking fingers that fumbled and delayed him. "I never had any spoons. What is he accusing me of? Why did he send me that box with those bank notes in it, tied without care? He sent, yes, a box of false money with the letter in it. He will never believe me that I have never seen any spoons. He is no doubt quite insane. A lunatic . . ."

That gave him a moment's hope: then he shook his grizzled head. The cheering thought of delivering Parsons into the keeping of those who cared for insane waifs gleamed before him for only the flash of an eye and then burst like a bubble against the hard wall of common sense.

"He has his Croix de Guerre and his friends and, without doubt, the papers relating to Madame Adelaide Smith's will. I cannot afford to confront him. Alas that I ever heard the name of Parsons! Spoons? What spoons? M. Dobrovsky was asking me for spoons but I had none, not yet."

He shivered again as he bent over the empty fireplace and placed a bunch of crumpled paper carefully in the ashes of the grate, laid both box and letter on it, struck a match, and put it to the paper. When it had lighted he breathed a sigh of relief, and swung his swivel-chair around to his desk again. His long yellow fingers drummed upon the desk with a nervous incessant action until the flames had quite consumed the last scrap of paper in the grate. Then he rose, and scattered the ashes, flung some odds and ends of advertising matter that had lain about the office since the former occupant had left them there, and added a few torn envelopes to the pile, to give an effect of cleaning up. He lighted this pile but put out the flames before they had fully ignited the papers.

He surveyed the half-burned heap of papers and the few scattered ashes with a thoughtful appraising look.

"It was necessary to make an end of that demoniac missive," he told himself, "or it would have risen up like Lazarus of old. None can find it now. It is finished."

He began to bring his few belongings from their hiding-places. His packing was light, for he had lived in eternal preparation for such emergencies as this. He had another office in Villefranche and one in Orleans.

" I shall be able to secure a third-class ticket on the eleven o'clock train," he thought, not even mentioning the destination to himself. " I shall pass quite unobserved. I do not wish to meet anyone, *anyone.* Most particularly I detest the Americans. They have no suavity. They are beasts of the field . . ."

He succeeded in vanishing without a trace and was not heard of in Mons again. Whether he went to the south of France or left the country is not certain. A fleshy man with small astonished eyes bought a tiny villa in an obscure village in northern Italy soon after his disappearance and it may have been M. Harfleur or it may not have been that worthy gentleman, for the owner of the villa was a man with an insatiable thirst for news from America. He had this peculiarity, that while he avoided the American tourists, he asked minute and detailed information as to their appearance, vocation and names. Names interested him least because, perhaps, he had known how easy it was to change them.

Richard Carter was not such an adept as the respectable Harfleur in the art of disappearance. The next morning found him still in the city. He had decided on his course. He would leave as soon as he had satisfied a question in his own mind. It was not really an important question to him yet it had grown into prominence over night; he felt he must find out about that good fellow, Johnny, and if he was as straight as he thought him, to give him a warning not to mix up with dangerous folks, like those two sham Italians.

He settled his hat carefully on his shining blond head and stuck his cane under his arm as he rang the bell of the dilapidated house in the poor street. He was pale and tired looking. He had not lost his cheerfulness, however. He smiled at the woman who had answered his ring. She was a faded little creature in cheap clothes ten years too young for her. She had a paper package in her arm.

"So Johnny hasn't got back yet," he remarked affably. "I hear that Shorty is in the hospital from that smash-up. Well, if your friend Johnny comes in tell him there will be news for him soon."

"Good news? I bet it'll be good news if you have a fist in it," the woman said with warmth. "I'll tell him ——"

"It may be good news to him, or it may not. If he is as good a man as I think he is, it'll be good news," remarked Carter, more seriously. "See here," he said, speaking in a lower tone. "What is Johnny, anyway? Do you know, and will you tell the truth? A lot depends on what you say, understand."

She looked up at him without fear or evasion. "He's been doin' a lot of drivin' for them two; him and Shorty. He ain't like Shorty, though. He's on the outside. I've always told him that he was gettin' into trouble when he worked for them two. Whoever they are, they ain't straight. He'd not done it, on'y the pay was so big, and our kid has been sick. We been married ten years and he's always been good to me and the kid. He worked for the foundry up there drivin' a truck till it busted up. He's all right, Mister—cross my heart. On'y he had to get the jack, for the doctor bills and all."

He pondered a moment. "I've been trying to dope out just what he had in this Bulono affair," he said slowly. "He seemed dumb enough about it when we were in the foundry that day, and he seemed to hate Shorty. Yes, I guess I'll have to believe you, Mrs. Dice." He straightened his hat. "Well, then tell him that he had better not do any more business with those big-pay people, they're too risky. And, if he can take you and the kid to the country for a while, it might be a good idea. If he can't, I'll stick by him. Thanks and remember . . . if he's called as a witness, I'm his friend. I just wanted to make sure what sort he was. Good-bye."

She watched him go down the steps and then she went back up the two long flights of stairs to her apartment; two small rooms at the back of the odorous house. She pushed open the door wearily. A stalwart young man in chauffeur uniform was sitting beside a couch where a little girl lay. She put her small bundle of marketing on the table.

"A fellow's just been here—I met him as I come in," she said. "He was askin' for you. I told him you were straight. He says not to take no more big-pay fares. Who is he? And what's he got on you?"

Johnny listened to her description. "Well, can you beat that?" he exclaimed with interest. "That's the lounge-lizard the Boss told me was tryin' to pass phony ten spots on 'em. Shorty had him down to the foundry for a whiles, and then when the smash-up came, I guess he vamoosed. I sorta liked him. He was an easy-goin' guy. He needn't tell me to lay off them fancy guys. The time I hauled that piece of freight over to the horspital, I swore off. I knew they was queer. I didn't know they was crooks, though, until I saw her take her make-up off whiles we was pullin' out of the street by the foundry. She was always black headed when I drove her at the Windham."

"Well, it's a funny mix-up," the woman remarked patiently. "I ain't goin' to say nothin'. I on'y hope we'll come out of this clean. I'm a-trustin' you, Johnny, like I always have."

He turned his face up to her as she came to his chair. "We'll come through clean, Mayme," he said. "Don't you worry. I'd like to know where them two are now, though. She made me leave 'em at a horspital in Flemington, though I don't believe now that it was a horspital at all. I bet she just wanted to get rid of me, so's they could sneak out private-like. The place didn't look like no horspital to me and they didn't go in. They was on the pavement when I druv off. I bet they got another bus and plugged right along. But I ain't lettin' on I know 'em. Shorty's done for and there ain't anyone else but this Carter who could make trouble for us."

CHAPTER XVII

MR. HOYT SPEAKS

"I SIMPLY can't write my letter to-day," Carol thought, as she sat in the garden some days later. "I can't settle down to anything. I've had to go on with my transcribing for Mr. Hoyt but anything else is just about impossible. It's queer how all the rest of them seem so content to wait till something turns up. Even Mr. Hoyt doesn't worry like he did at first."

She was on the circular bench under the elms, with her writing-pad on its broad arm and her idle pen in her fingers. She was terribly homesick. The strain of the past fortnight had been hard on her, and she longed for one of her own people, someone to whom she would not have to explain herself, someone who knew her weaknesses and foibles and yet loved her without stint.

"I wish I could have gone to Arizona with them," she said to herself. "I might have gotten a position there."

She knew she was silly. The car-fare would have been an insurmountable obstacle to any such plan. She sighed and took up her pen. She'd write her letter. It would be a dull letter but it would keep her busy.

She wrote listlessly for a time and then her face brightened and her pen moved briskly. She smiled to herself now and again, as she described her trip to Poughkeepsie and the transformation of Beefy Harford.

She was smiling when Mrs. Biggs appeared and her cheerful appearance had a strange effect on the small housekeeper. "Well, I'm sure I'm glad to see you happy," she said, as she came to the opposite end of the bench and sat down. "I'm sorry to break in when you're writing letters, but there's something I must ask you. Did you ever mail any letters for Miss Claire Burk?"

The formal title made Carol open her eyes. "I never mailed any letters for Claire," she answered evenly. "I would have been quite willing ——"

"That's not what matters," Mrs. Biggs cut in crisply. "I just wanted to know whether you had or not. I haven't seen her mail any, either. And Alph never took a one for her. Whatever letters went, she took 'em her own precious self."

"No, I never mailed any letters," Carol repeated. "I thought Alph took them to the post-office for her. I know she got a lot of letters from her Aunt Julia, for I've seen Alph give them to her. He always brought in the mail, of course. She may not have written many but she certainly got a lot."

"A good many letters, counting all that came these last weeks, but," and Mrs. Biggs lowered her voice dramatically, "not one had the right postmark. Not one from Charleston, North Carolina. Mostly from places around; Newark, West Philadelphia, Norristown. The writing wasn't like an old invalid lady would write. The paper wasn't very good, either, just any sort, different every time."

Carol's level brows drew together and her grey eyes darkened. "Are you trying to make out that Miss Claire had something to do with the robbery?" she asked in a cold tone. "That's perfectly preposterous, Mrs. Biggs. I'll not listen to such nonsense."

She laid aside her pad and pen with an abrupt gesture and left Mrs. Biggs staring after her. She felt she could not endure any more secret whisperings and suggestions. The past two weeks had been enough to get on anyone's nerves, with all the mysteries of the robbery, the missing spoons, the disappearance of the robbers and other questions yet unsolved. She would not hear Claire put under suspicion, not even by such a gentle mouse as Mrs. Alph.

"Claire mixed up in a thing like that!" she said to herself. "It's perfectly crazy." She stopped outside the kitchen door. "Does Mr. Hoyt know anything of this idiotic nonsense, I wonder? I'm going straight in and find out. If Alph and Mrs. Biggs are talking it over, there's good reason to believe he's heard some of their talk."

She saw Mr. Hoyt's long figure in his favorite chair on the terrace, and she went to him quickly, moved by the rush of indignation within her. She caught up the shears and flower-basket that Mrs. Biggs had left on the bench. If her rush of courage ebbed, she would have an excuse for seeking him.

He looked up with interest. "You're going out to cut the flowers? I wish you'd get some of those new delphinium, the bright blue ones. I want to send some over to Burpee. He vowed I hadn't that particular shade of blue and I want to prove I was right, now that they've begun to bloom. Alph is going out in a few minutes, I think, so you'll have to bring them in before you cut the other flowers."

"I'll get them at once," she said and turned. Her questions could wait. In fact, she would have a chance to arrange her thoughts; she was always leaping before she looked. This needed a calmer mind than she had now. Mrs. Biggs had disappeared from the garden when she got there. She was not delayed long, for there were but three or four of the bright blue heads opening out, and they had only a few half-closed buds to show their color. She took them back to Mr. Hoyt, ready to speak now.

"I think you should know what Alpheus and his wife are saying, Mr. Hoyt," she said, standing before him with the basket held in a tight grasp. "They are silly enough to say, or suggest, that Miss Burk had some share in the robbery. I hope you will put an end to it. It might do a lot of harm."

He did not reply at once, but looked up at her with his starry eyes as if he were trying to explore all the inner recesses of her mind. "Does it trouble you very much to hear such talk?" he asked in a slow thoughtful voice. "Do you have no such suspicions yourself?"

"I?" she echoed, astounded. "I suspect Claire? It's the last thing in the world I should dream of.

She's silly but she isn't bad. If she had any share in it, would she have found your ruby ring? Or, if she had found it, would she have returned it?" Her wrath returned and she spoke out of her heart. "I think it's perfectly abominable! Poor Claire, I never liked her very much but I'll stick by her now. She's alone. She's lost everything. If you let those two bring any accusation against her, Mr. Hoyt, I'll leave, too."

She had not meant to utter these amazing words. She was astounded as she heard herself saying such things. She'd stick by them, though. Poor silly homeless Claire would find she had one friend, at least. In the tumult of her righteous emotions, she forgot Arizona, Vassar, Alice, the Shop.

"So you would sacrifice yourself so far as that?" He was rather stern. His usually kind face had changed. "You would give up your position here and perhaps your chance of college next session for this girl, who has not been so generous in regard to you. Do you know what she has been saying about you, before me, before Biggs and his wife—perhaps before others?—if there were others who would listen to her."

A cold hand clutched her anger and it died. She felt suddenly small and silly, like a child caught in some grandiose mimicry of the mother whose gown she masqueraded in.

"No. I didn't know she had said anything about me," she answered in some confusion.

"She has not been delicate in her methods, nor reserved in her speech," he went on, looking into her face with what she took to be cold scorn. "She said, before the two Biggs and me, that you were deeply implicated in this robbery. She pointed out the fact that your door was unlocked on that night, that you might have wiped the dust from the window-sill in the tower for your own purposes, and, last of all and not the least, she produced a card that she said she had found under the blotter of your desk, where you had hidden it."

"The card!" cried Carol in great excitement, interrupting him. "So that's where it went! I hunted for it high and low and never dreamed it could have lodged in there. There wasn't any room for it between the blotter and pad, I thought. They were pasted together ——"

"One moment, please." It was his turn to interrupt. "Do I understand that you admit you had this card? And that you lost it and hunted for it? How was it that you did not mention this before?"

Carol looked at him with earnest, wide eyes. "Why, I forgot about it. It sounds queer, I know. It's the truth, though. After I put it there and had hunted for it, I never thought of it again. It was stupid of me. I don't expect you to believe me but that is what I did; I forgot it. I did think a lot about that calendar-slip that we spoke about. I suppose it was because I found the card almost a week before the robbery that it didn't seem important."

He put the card back into his wallet. "It was the night I was away, wasn't it? That beautiful moonlight night, my birthday. I remember Mrs. Biggs saying that you had been uneasy; going about sort of scary, as she put it. You had spoken of the lock on your door, too."

Was he trying to show her that, in spite of his evident scorn for Claire's methods, he shared some of her suspicions? Carol's heart sank and then steadied again. She had nothing to fear.

"I was rather upset, but it was just my imagination," she replied simply. "I thought I saw a face at the window, and that made me hear all sorts of odd noises. I took Mrs. Biggs for a burglar. It was funny. I went to sleep, though, a little after twelve. It was a perfect night, after the little shower. Everything was so calm and lovely."

"It was full moon," he said. "I think you had better take those delphinium to the kitchen and ask Mrs. Biggs to put them in deep water for a minute. They'll carry better. Though it isn't far to Fordhook Farms. Thank you."

That was all. She went on her errand feeling more puzzled than she had ever been. One thing was certain, she did not mean to let Claire's preposterous accusation trouble her too deeply until she found whether Mr. Hoyt actually shared her suspicions. His manner had been so odd that she could not tell what he thought, or didn't think.

"It was pretty mean of her," she said, as she laid the long stems in a deep pan of water. Mrs. Biggs was not in the kitchen, nor anywhere in sight. "How could she . . . so that's what she meant by asking me so many strange questions . . . did I know what sort of spoons they were, and did I wake up easily . . . and if those voices actually did say those words that I heard, or if I'd just thought they said them, when Mr. Hoyt hadn't been struck but only fallen down and hurt himself. . . ."

She took the flowers out to Biggs who had come in from the morning errands. She thought he looked at her queerly but, as he said nothing, she handed him the slender oiled-paper roll with the bright blue color showing through its translucence like drowned flowers in a pool.

"They are to go to Burpee's, you know," she said.

He nodded and handed her a letter from the post-office at Warrington. "Nothin' more but this," he informed her, as he laid the package on the seat beside him. "Tell the Boss I'll stop at Barrat's for that twine he wanted, will you, Miss Breck? I couldn't get it over to the store."

Carol tore the envelope from Alice's letter. Never had she been more comforted by the sight of the angular writing. She wished Alice were here. The note was brief, as usual, in her new manner.

> "dear partner beefy has ordered four fans can you make them at once or does the slave driver hoyt keep you on the treadmill day and night let me know when you can send them for beefys reason may totter if delayed too long
>
> i suppose miss claire burk told you about the stockings too bad she missed you loads of love and more hope for our parnership yours as ever alice."

"The stockings?" wondered Carol. "What stockings? Claire didn't say a word about stockings to me. Here she comes, though. I'll ask her about them. Maybe she can explain."

Claire was in a hurry. She did not want to face Carol, after the accusation she had made before the three others. It made her feel sort of queer. She had to stop a moment, though.

"Stockings? What stockings?" she repeated, just as Carol had done. "I never said a word about stockings to anyone you know. How could I? When I've never spoken to a soul that knows you, except right here."

The memory of how and what she had spoken before those three flashed before Claire like a tangible written record, flaring before her in the sunlight. She looked at Carol and in those clear, earnest eyes saw that Carol had been told and that she, too, saw that flaming scroll.

It hung between them like a fiery barrier. Neither could find a word that might tear it down; Claire had no ready excuses such as came so easily on lesser occasions, and Carol was mute with shame, shame for the other's treachery.

Carol stood where she was and it was a relief to Claire that she did not move nor utter any word. She thought, as she hurried down the back lane, "I wish I hadn't done it. I was a dunce to have put my foot in it, for they all are on her side. If I had known how things would go with me. But how could I know, when the Señor hadn't opened his lips? I might have kept quiet but I was scared, afraid I'd have to take a job again. I wanted to get rid of her, but now . . ."

Carol moved rapidly away. She felt a curious sense of loss in looking into Claire's sea-blue eyes and listening to her voice. She felt she could never speak to her again with the old freedom of speech and manner. That flaming barrier had scorched away all grace of speech between them.

"It's sickening," she thought as she went her way. "It was horrid enough of Mrs. Biggs to say those things about her but ——" she halted, struck by memory of Mrs. Biggs' face and Hoyt's words about Claire's audience for her accusation. "Mrs. Biggs was there. She heard it. She didn't believe one word of it." There was warmth in this certainty. "That's why she came out to talk to me, and I ran away from her. I'll hunt her up. I won't tell her that I *know,* but I'll be nice to her, dear little Biggsy."

In the rush of gratitude that filled her, she moved quickly, her homesickness and her disappointment forgotten. She found Mrs. Biggs in the hen-house, gathering eggs. She halted in the doorway, for now that she was fronting Mrs. Alpheus, she did not know how to express herself.

"I didn't mean to be snippy," she began rather awkwardly, for she wanted to avoid bringing Claire into the light. "I'm sorry if I sounded horrid."

Mrs. Biggs counted the eggs in her pan before she replied calmly, "I guess Mr. Alan told you. You see what sort she is. Sometimes older folks do have a bit more sense than young ones." And then having unburdened herself of this wisdom, she beamed on Carol. "Don't you let nothing, *nothing* bother you, Miss Carol," she said earnestly. "You'll come out all right, mark my words. I bet we'll have some word about those robbers pretty soon now."

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR THE SAKE OF THE THIRTEENTH SPOON

IN spite of the August sunshine there was a crispness in the air: the town across the hills seemed so close that she could see the speck of white that was the face of the court-house clock. The grey façade of the Historical Building looked across the intervening folds of hills with its tiny windows set like bright minute jewels sending out the glory of the sun. Carol had finished another of the temple fans and had brought it, neatly packed, out to give to Alpheus to mail.

He had gone evidently, as the garage was empty of the truck, and the kitchen showed no trace of Mrs. Biggs, who was to have accompanied him to Doylestown for some marketing.

"I'll have to ask Mr. Hoyt if I may go over later," she thought. She knew he would consent, since he was interested in this work she was doing.

She went indoors again and put the package on the hall-table. As she laid it there she saw an envelope addressed in a hand she knew well.

"Jack Seymour, and he hasn't learned to write any clearer. Mercy, what a scrawl! It's nice of him to write, though, after the way I've treated his other letters. I wonder where he is now?"

She stopped where she was in the hall, though the light was none too good: she was eager to hear all about the old crowd up at Williams. Vacation had scattered them far and wide, and though Jim Ferguson had written occasionally, his letters weren't like Jack's.

"What in the world!" she murmured. The heading was certainly queer. Jack was never familiar.

She glanced down the first sheet, and her brows drew together in bewilderment. Was he trying to propose to her? Of all the crazy ——

The astonishing letter ran:

> "Dear kid,
>
> I am sorry I did not say good-bye. I have missed you a whole lot. I think I am going to Canada and try my luck on a big farm. Save your good clothes for a while and as soon as I get a real man's job up there, I will send for you and we will get married at once.
>
> I think you will like Canada. I do love you, honey, even if I did go off rather suddenly. You will forgive me, like the dear little chick you are ——"

Bewildered, she turned the page and mechanically, from habit, glanced down at the signature.

"Your own Dick!" she exclaimed aloud. "Why, it isn't my letter. It's for Claire. It's from that Cousin Dick of hers!"

She had blundered into Claire's private affairs! How should she explain satisfactorily? Claire would think she had been snooping about as Claire herself had done. What a person does themselves, they are apt to believe others will do. She stood in perplexity, the letter in her fingers. What should she do? It was an awkward position for her to be in.

"I'll go straight up and tell her about it, and she can believe me or not," she declared, finally. "She probably will say some horrid things, but I'll have to put up with them. I ought to have looked at the envelope more carefully—though our two names are so much alike that I've often seen her pick up my letters in mistake for her own."

Claire was not in her room though Carol had heard her not half an hour ago. Carol knocked several times and then pushed open the door. She stood on the threshold looking about, and a sense of something unusual came upon her as she looked.

"She's put away all her pink toilet set," she thought in surprise. "And the slippers from under the bed. Her new bags aren't in the corner, either. How strange and empty it looks."

She went in then and, though she knew she risked Claire coming in upon her, she opened the closet door. There was not a garment on the hangers. Not a shoe in the bags. Not a hat on the shelf.

"She's gone!" she cried. "Oh, I hope I didn't drive her away! Just when she ought to have had this letter, too!"

Distressed beyond expression, she looked all about for some scrap of paper, some message or even a bare address. There was not a shred of evidence to point the way Claire had taken. She had vanished completely.

Carol ran downstairs and found no one in the house.

She did not know what to do. Perhaps she might find where Claire had gone by calling up the express-office. She must have sent her trunk, the new wardrobe trunk by some means; she could not have smuggled it out as she might have done with the bags.

The express-office in Doylestown had no record of any trunk from The Hermitage. They offered to come for it, if it was not too late. The boss had been away yesterday and things had sort of got behindhand. But they were positive there had been no call from The Hermitage.

Carol thanked them and said it was too late now; there was no use trying to be too truthful about a trifle when so much was involved. "I'll slip into another dress and be ready when Alph comes back," she thought. "Perhaps I can ask the bus-driver. She'd have taken the noon bus to-day. He'll be back at the station by the time I get there."

She slid the white linen bungalow apron off over her head and shook back her hair. She ought to take some money along, she thought. She had a little under the candlestick on her dressing-table, and she glanced towards it as she got down her flowered frock. She gave a cry and started forward. A folded sheet was lying on the dressing-table partly hidden under the pin-tray.

Claire wrote:

> "Please tell Mr. Hoyt that I will always be grateful to him. When I see him again I will explain everything. I am sorry, too, that I was

> cross at you. I was married to Señor Manuelo yesterday. I would not let him tell you, though he is crazy to. We are going to his home and then we will go to Europe. By way of New York, so we can drop in on you. Love to all,
>
> CLAIRE."

She went slowly downstairs, pondering at each step what words she should use to break the news to Mr. Hoyt. She heard the Major's voice as she entered the room. He had just come in and was standing by the table. He was so excited that he did not hear her at the door. He pounded on the table and drew down his bushy brows as he glared at Hoyt who sat opposite.

"Manuelo telephoned me not fifteen minutes ago, I tell you," he almost shouted. "He's gone off with that snip! That empty-headed pink doll! He's thrown himself away. I told you to send her packing. She's the sort that can't help make trouble for anyone who has anything to do with her."

"You seemed to be rather sorry for her yourself," Hoyt defended himself without rancor. "You tried to get a good easy position for her and you said she had been badly treated. Why be so upset? If Manuelo likes that kind of a girl he will find one, no matter how many of the finer types he meets. A man marries to suit himself, you know, Major."

"He's a fool," snapped the Major. "He's proved it. If it had been the other one, now, I wouldn't have blamed him. She's worth . . ."

"The other one would not have had the facility for adapting herself to radically different customs, perhaps," returned Hoyt quietly. "The empty heads, as you call them, are occasionally capable of being filled by superficial, or novel trifles. Claire may make a better wife to the temperamental, fiery South American than . . ."

Carol broke in at last. She came forward with the sheet of paper in her hand.

The Major cocked his eyebrows at her. "I can guess what it is," he remarked ironically. "The heavens have fallen. Mrs. Manuelo has asked to be remembered to us. Yes. We know all about it. That snip has got a permanent position, wheedling the dollars out of Manuelo's pockets."

He laughed at her crestfallen expression. His good nature returned in the act of placing a chair for her and when she sat facing him with her earnest eyes and sweet seriousness, he was quite his best self.

"I was hopping mad at first," he confessed. "I felt that my hospitality had been betrayed but now, by Jove, I believe Hoyt's right. Manuelo was doomed to get a gold-digger. It's Fate." His tone changed and he leaned forward. "I had a talk with my friend at the Glenside Police Station," he said in a more guarded tone. "He tells me they have been busy over in New York. They've taken a fellow who ought to be able to give some information. He was seen several times in company with the Princess 'Bologny' down at the Windham; danced with her once or twice. He was a sort of carrier-pigeon for her, the police think. Anyway, they are detaining him in hope of finding out where the bird has flown. So far he declares he knows nothing; that they fooled him badly and made him the goat when they ran off."

Hoyt's sensitive fingers crumpled the paper that Carol had given him. He glanced at the Major with a question in his deep eyes.

The Major shook his head. "Not even the slightest resemblance to your young Parsons," he declared. "This one is a regular sport. Golden-haired Adonis. His name is Carter; Richard Calhoun Carter, and he comes of a good old family, I believe."

"Claire's Cousin Dick!" The words leaped out before Carol knew she was speaking. "And he just wrote her a letter. He wanted to marry her." She stopped, realizing that she had done it again.

She had to explain. She brought out the letter when they demanded it and told of her encounter with Mr. Richard C. Carter at the hotel at Washington's Crossing, and in the garden. She expected the two men to break out against Claire's duplicity but they took it remarkably well.

"You're right about her; she is a snip," Mr. Hoyt told the Major. "I guess it's just as well she has taken herself off to South America. I don't believe she had any serious affair with this Carter, she's not the sort to break her heart about a mere man. He's probably as much deceived as the Señor; he seems to think she is constancy itself."

"See here, Alan," the Major broke in, excitedly. "That Carter fellow was apparently the errand-boy for Her Highness, the 'Bologny,' and he was hanging about here. He'll know something about the spoons.

By Jove, when I got the fan back, I knew I ought to have followed it up but your confounded prejudice against the police ——"

"Hold on," commanded Alan Hoyt, sitting up very erect in his chair. "Say that again, please. When you got the fan. . . . What do you mean by that? What fan and where did you get it? And why was it kept secret from me?"

Carol felt sorry for the Major; she knew just how he felt. He went red and he stammered at first. "I—I —— Oh, confound it, let me tell the whole story. Don't look as if you could eat me up. Your precious Parsons hasn't had a thing to do with the robbery, as I've told you over and over. Miss Breck, stay where you are. You can corroborate me. . . ."

Mr. Hoyt was a good listener. He allowed the Major to proceed with the story of the discovery of the fan, to enlarge on Carol's good sense in managing her share in the affair, to describe the foundry-yard and the wreck of the brown Renault at great length, and the few questions he put were brief and to the point. When the recital was ended he relaxed and smiled on them both in a singularly radiant manner for a man whose most valuable possessions were still unaccounted for.

"It surely is a marvel to have secured the fan, without danger or publicity," he said earnestly. "I cannot tell you, both of you, how deeply grateful I am. The fan is a cherished heirloom, as you know, Major," and his eyes twinkled. "And its recovery means, well, you both know what it means to me. I shan't keep it here, though, not for a time at least. I am going to ask you to put it in your collection, my dear friend, as a loan, mind you, a loan. I may want to withdraw it at any time—I make no hard and fast stipulations—and it must be accessible to me whenever I choose to demand it. Is that all right?"

"Right as rain," the other responded promptly. Carol had thought he would show some emotion or perhaps refuse the generous offer, but he appeared quite untouched by the unselfishness of his friend. "I've got it in my safe; a real safe, mind you, with a combination that I can remember myself. I'll get in touch with the Art Museum at once, Alan, my boy, and if their committee will behave like the wide-awake art-lovers they are supposed to be, the collection will be out there on the banks of the Schuylkill within a fortnight, for all the citizens and all the visitors to The City of Brotherly Love to enjoy."

He rose to go and his face was beaming. He shook hands with them both with great heartiness. Before he left the study, however, he paused and frowned in a perplexed way at Hoyt.

"I suppose you won't let me tell Henderson about the case?" he put the question doubtfully. "You still insist that the police must be kept out of your affairs. Even when you know that *he* had no share in it?"

"Even now, that the fan is back and you believe you are on the track of the robbers," Hoyt answered steadily. "I am not one to swing about like a weather-vane, with every wind that blows. Even if the advertisement doesn't work. I am going to keep my name out of this so far as I can. Sorry. That's final, though."

The Major went down the hall muttering something about mules, and was soon seen driving off in his small car at a high speed. Evidently, he was ruffled again, in spite of having secured the desire of his heart in having been given the custody of the treasured Watteau fan.

"Human nature is a funny thing," remarked Mr. Hoyt as he turned to his desk. "Here I am—I thought if I could be assured that—that someone who was dear to me was not implicated in this affair, I'd be satisfied. I have the fan back and I am practically certain that this—this person had no hand in the theft, and yet I am terribly uneasy. I shall never be able to get hold on myself until the spoons are found. And odd as it may seem to you, I'd sacrifice all the others—the whole twelve that I got together with so much labor and expense—if I could lay my hands on the Major's birthday present, the thirteenth spoon."

He motioned her to bring her note-book to take the dictation that had been delayed by his absence on the farms this morning and he settled himself in his chair, with the papers on which he had made his notes from which to dictate. He waited till she had the carbon sheet adjusted and the paper in the typewriter and then he spoke slowly and with emphasis. She expected him to go on with yesterday's subject and her fingers were ready, hovering over the keys.

"I'll never rest until I have the thirteenth spoon," he said. "If those scoundrels have got it, if they have worked it over, altered its marks . . ." He broke off to say in a low voice of concentrated emotion, "I've been a fool. I surely have. I'll drive over to the Crow's Nest after lunch. No, you shall drive me, Miss Breck, and I'll get the Major to go down to Glenside with me to that good friend of his. He will know what to advise. I have dallied too long over this matter. It is time the police knew about those spoons."

CHAPTER XIX

THE RETURN

THE steamer was moving slowly up the bay.

It was high noon and yet there was a rose flush over land and sea. The funnels of all the little river craft flew fluttering banners of rose-and-gold; even the refuse a-wash on the heaving water was part of the gleam and glitter: rosy hope stood at the elbow of the morning.

Frederick Parsons looked over the rail and thought, " It's a happy omen. A new world. All the shadows gone. I've never seen that rose flush at noon-time before."

Liberty, dark amid the quiver of restless water, flung up her torch unmoved by all the pulse of life about her. The sunshine could not light that torch. " It's got to come from within," he thought, dreamily. He liked to follow an idea into the maze of poetic mists.

Then, as the boat swung about and the throng moved over to pack the rail about him, he felt something of the excitement that catches a traveller making harbor after sea-wanderings. A boy jostled him and he smiled at him. These third class passengers were interesting; they did not camouflage their feelings. He wished he had the strength of the red-cheeked lad. He was pretty weak, even after two days' respite from seasickness. His heart beat too quickly; it made him rather giddy.

"I mustn't give out," he thought. "I'll feel better when I'm on hard pavements again. I ought to be there by four or five o'clock at the latest."

The wharves grew more distinct, the blurs on the piers became human beings, the shimmer above them showed waving hats and handkerchiefs, the pale dots turned into eager faces, and then there was an excited crowd pressing about the gangplank as the first passengers began to disembark. Parsons was not among the first to leave the ship.

He had not the strength to push ahead in the crowd, and he wanted to scan the faces below him on the pier; there might be some emissary from Brown or Miss Jordon waiting there for him. He was not anxious to fall into their hands just now. After he had completed his business, he meant to look them up. Now, however, he had no appetite for an encounter with them.

"Perhaps Harfleur has communicated with them," he thought, as he took the first step down the canvas lane. "It's more probable that he has scurried to cover, yet he may have warned them. I am not out of the woods, no, not by any means."

No one halted him, no familiar voice hailed him, and he went out with the moving throng, which ebbed and flowed about baggage-station and telephone, surged out into the humming tides of city life and was lost.

At the Terminal he bought a ticket to Philadelphia and found a seat in the day-coach. He counted his money twice to make sure.

"Just enough to get to Willow Grove," he thought. "I'll have to walk, or descend to the ranks of thumb-tourists. Well, as long as I get there."

He could not know how events were shaping themselves to provide him a means of reaching his journey's end, or he would have been more sparing of his strength; he was very weak indeed and could ill afford to tax himself on this warm, enervating summer day. Neither Alice Whelen nor Beatrice Harford had any idea that they were to share in the tragic moment when he delivered his package to its owner.

The two girls were in high spirits that morning. An unexpected half-holiday had given them the chance to look over a most interesting addition to Beefy's worldly possessions.

"It's a peach, a pippin, a darling," exclaimed Alice. "Beefy, my vocabulary is too limited to express my admiration. If this were in the days of my palmy youth, I should be quite justified in declaring it was the kitten's overshoes. I can say no more. Let me try it, will you? How does the choke work? Just pull out? I see."

Alice started the small new expensive car that had arrived a week ago and been declared defective by its owner after she had failed in a spectacular effort to overtake the Warrens and incidentally show off the paces of her latest present from home. Since when it had been in the agent's care until its delivery on this happy morning.

"Let's go out towards New Hamberg," suggested Beatrice. "There won't be much traffic on the road this morning. You can hit her up when we're out of town. I don't mind."

Once they were free of Poughkeepsie Alice put the machine through its gaits, and the wide, smooth Post-road invited a thorough demonstration of the steady swift little car. They passed Fishkill and the entrance to Cold Spring and were not fed up.

"It's silly to go back so soon," declared Miss Harford, reasonably. "We have the half-holiday and they know we've taken the car out. Let's take a peep at that nice place at Bear Mountain. I'm getting hungry."

"A carnal minded and yet rather interesting suggestion," murmured Alice and she swung the car down into the Garrison road. "We'll slip out on the new river drive through this respectable village and cut ten miles off the run."

"Bosh! the miles don't matter," returned Beefy, placidly. "I like to get somewhere. Not a skimpy thirty miles or fifty miles. I like to take a *drive*."

Alice slowed the car and stopped. "We may as well be clear on an important point, Beatrice Harriet Harford," she remarked. "I don't want to be a parasite. And I haven't any money to throw to the bears on Bear Mountain. If we go to the restaurant there, you'll have to consent to a reduction in the price of your necklace. To the amount of my meal ticket. Otherwise we return to our Alma Mater."

"Bosh," remarked Beefy. "You make me laugh. I invited you, didn't I? I've got fifty dollars in my purse."

"That habit of yours of using the same exclamation to express all sorts of emotions is a bad one, my dear," Alice commented. She did not snap on the ignition as the other had expected. "As to the invitation, I will say that, after we have lunched, you may invite me wherever you please and I will accept without demur. You understand what the word *demur* means, I hope? The luncheon at the café will come off the price of your necklace, however."

"Oh, all right," Beefy gave in good naturedly. "It won't be much anyway; a dollar perhaps. You're making a stiff profit on that necklace anyway and . . ."

"Beatrice darling, that word *anyway*," hinted Alice gently as she started the car. "Might I suggest that you look up another to vary your conversational exercises? I can offer my Thesaurus . . ."

They went on without more argument. The lunch was good and Beefy's love of travel mounted. "Let's drop in on our partner," she suggested as they seated themselves again in the car. "We can make the round trip easy enough. I used to do more than that without stopping. I'll drive half the way and you the other half. We take the shortest way back."

"I'll let her out a bit wherever there's a chance," nodded Alice. "We can make it easily enough. Did you get that word—easily—my lamb? Not easy. In the sentence, 'We can make it' you should employ the word easily. If you said 'We will find it easy to get there' your word would have been correct."

"Bosh!" muttered Beefy cheerfully. "Let's go."

Carol was not tearing over the roads down in Bucks County at the same rate of speed. In fact she found the rough stretch of mended road decidedly rough going, and she slowed the little, rather wheezy car down to a slower gait. She was on an errand for Mr. Hoyt whom she had left at the Crow's Nest, and had taken a short cut across to the main highway. Mr. Hoyt wanted some papers relating to the Hallman Farm and his other agricultural business and she had volunteered to get them quickly for him.

"If we had gone over yesterday, as he intended to, this road wouldn't have been in such a state; they've just dumped the stone on it this morning," she thought.

She got through the short section of uneven broken stone and was on the highway without mishap. Now she could make up lost time. She pressed her foot on the gas and the car leaped forward. At the same moment there came a sharp hissing whisper from the rear.

Psst!

Carol knew that sound. She stopped the car and got out to examine the damage. It was the rear left tire. Flat as a flounder.

"Mr. Hoyt and the Major will be ready to eat tacks," she thought. "There isn't a farmhouse or store within a mile, so I can't telephone. I'll be as quick as I can, though. My word, it's hot!"

Good luck favored her in the spot where she had been compelled to stop, for there were tall trees whose shade made the task easier. Thank goodness, it had not blown out on that long sunny stretch behind her. She could manage very well here. The tires were not heavy and she was deft with tools.

She went around the side of the car next to the deserted wayside-stand; the flat was on that side. Her eyes were on the damaged tire and she did not look towards the shack. It was like all other wayside eye-sores; it had the usual soft drink signs in garish variety and a large ice-cream banner that half hid the grass beside it. She had the jack in her hands and stooped to adjust it. She knew the spare was easy to unlock.

"Can I help you?"

A white, exhausted young man with his hat in his hand and a faint pleasant ghost of a smile on his lips was getting to his feet. He held on to the ice-cream sign to help him rise. He was apologetic. "I'm rather fagged. The sun back there," he nodded to the hot road behind them. "But I'm really all right. Let me help you. I'm an expert in flats."

His candid brown eyes stirred some memory that passed as she smiled back at him. "If you will take the wrench," she suggested, glad of the offer. She did not notice how his hands trembled.

Together they made short work of it. When the job was done, she could do no less than ask him if he were going in her direction. "I am not going up this pike," she explained. "I turn off at the next cross-road. You may want to go to Doylestown."

"Later I shall go there," he answered. "First I must go to The Hermitage. Do you happen to know if Mr. Alan Hoyt is still living at The Hermitage?"

"He has just sent me over there on an errand for him," she told him, thinking this must be one of the detectives that had begun to appear in all sorts of guises since Hoyt had notified the police of his loss. "I have to go straight back to the Crow's Nest, though. Mr. Hoyt is there with the Major ——"

"May I go to him? Wherever he is," he seemed violently agitated. "It is most important."

He swayed a little as he opened the car door for her and his face was startling in its pallor. He laughed at his weakness, as he took his seat beside her.

"I'm a bit over-trained," he smiled bravely. "I did the stretch from Willow Grove in record time. I couldn't bring myself to ask for a ride, though I'm in a hurry, too."

At The Hermitage he sat in the car, drooping and wiping his brow. She did not ask him to get out. Alpheus and Mrs. Biggs were not in sight. She had her key and was soon back with the papers in her bag. She found him bent over a small penny-pad, busy with a fountain pen.

"Do you want me to leave some message here?" she asked, wondering that he should write when he was so soon to meet Mr. Hoyt. She held out her hand.

"Thanks, no, it is just a word or two, in case I—I—don't find Mr. Alan," he replied, as he folded the paper. "I have brought something . . ." his voice trailed off into silence. He got a small package out of his coat pocket and held it between his thin veined hands.

Carol was occupied listening to the slight noises of the car. She paid no attention to the young man on the seat beside her: she was afraid that other tire, the old one with the worn spots, might be perverse enough to pop at this inconvenient time. She had not thought of it before. The good one had burst, why not the frail worn one that had been on the invalid list so long?

She made the entrance to the Crow's Nest without misadventure and was slowing down for the curve when the tooting of a horn behind her made her turn.

A shining sports-roadster with top down and two heads showing over the gleaming windshield was signalling her. She slowed still more and looked in the little mirror on her own windshield.

"Alice and Beefy!" she exclaimed aloud. "What luck! I'll——"

They swept past her on the wider part of the drive as it circled to the front of the house. Major Walton and his friend rose as the two cars came abreast before the steps of the portico. The Major was not looking at the shining new sports-roadster. His eyes were fixed on the man who sat motionless beside Carol in the little old runabout.

"Frederick Parsons!" he exclaimed. "By Jove, he's come back again!"

Mr. Hoyt came quickly down the steps. Carol turned to her companion. "Won't you get out?" she began, and stopped.

They all were stricken into silence by the strange calm of the young man called Parsons. He sat with the paper and the small package in his lap, holding them with his thin fingers as if he would never release them. It was Beefy Harford who cried out.

"He's dead!" she cried. "Can't you see he is dead!"

Carol's heart gave a leap and stopped for the fraction of a second. Here indeed was the man who had been such a mysterious figure in the maze of these agitating weeks. Frederick Parsons, the tramp, innocent, loyal, even unto death. She stood by in mute wonder as they carried his poor body from the car. He had come back, and she knew in some hidden way, they all knew that he had not been the man who had taken the treasures from the safe in the study.

She sank down on a chair on the porch, too much upset by the event to be of use in this crisis. It was Alice and Beefy who went for the doctor.

It seemed hours until Dr. Byrnes came out from the library where they had laid Frederick Parsons' worn-out shell.

"Organic trouble," he pronounced. "His heart could not stand the work he made it do. He must have felt he was near the end. If you had not met him, Miss Breck, he would have collapsed on the road. He might not have written that note which explains his share in the matter. He might have been found dead with the package on him. Thank God, you took him in."

"But I let him help me put on the tire," her voice was almost a wail. "I never saw that he was so terribly ill. Perhaps——"

Dr. Byrnes held up his hand. "We won't go into that," he said sharply. "You did the best thing for him; you brought him to his journey's end. He died knowing he would deliver his message to the man he meant it for. Be thankful you had a flat tire, or you'd have passed him by."

He turned and moved aside as Mr. Hoyt with firm tread came into the hallway, and Carol forgot remorse in the sight of Mr. Hoyt's face. It was so white, almost as white as the face that was shut away by the closed door of the library and his hands trembled as he laid the package and the piece of folded paper brought by Parsons on the center-table of the wide hall. His eyes, however, held a deep peace, and his voice was vibrant as he spoke.

"Justice is not always the reward of those who have suffered innocently," he said, standing by the table and facing them with the sheet of the penny-pad in his fingers. "This dear friend of mine who lies in there has had little justice from—from us all. Even I, who knew him so well and knew him incapable of deceit or treachery, had come in these last few days to fear that he had some part in the robbery which is now public property. When the police told me that he had been in collusion with the unknown thieves, I had to believe them."

He was silent for a moment and then went on in a louder tone as if the ears behind the library door might be reached by his voice.

" He has come back to-day. Come of his own accord and brought his proofs with him, the evidence of his faith and love. Listen." He read the scribbled lines on the poor scrap of paper with a failing voice.

> My dear friend, I must explain. I was ill. It is a blank. I came to myself in Brussels, in a hotel. I had a beard, and a passport. Frederick Perkins. This package was inside my coat. Addressed to a rogue in a French town. He had cheated my mother out of money. I sent him a warning. I came on the boat this morning. You will know, perhaps where the rest of the spoons are . . . if he has them he . . . will send them to me. The Fountain House . . . I was at a place on Thorp Street . . . 325 . . . I saw it when they took me out . . . to the steamer . . . Miss Jordon with red hair and a man named Brown . . .

He opened the package before them, a sort of ritual of justification. It contained six of the ancient Apostle spoons.

There was a long silence. Beefy Harford was crying softly. Alice stared blindly out of the window at the pine-branches that waved their dark green masses against the pane. The Major sat with downcast eyes, and his lips under his short white mustache twitched painfully. Carol's eyes were wet and her heart was sore for the suffering, the devotion, the perseverance of Frederick Parsons. She moved over to Mr. Hoyt as the others went towards the portico.

" That tramp,—I told Mrs. Biggs about him long ago ——" she said in a low faltering voice. "He came to see someone, he said. He must have been ill then. He seemed confused. That must have been the time he says is all blank."

Hoyt nodded. He did not speak at once. Then he said quietly, "Will you fetch Biggs and his wife? Parsons was fond of them. I want them to hear about it while he is still here with us."

Roused by the calm, every-day tone in which he spoke, she responded at once. After she had brought the two sorrowing Biggs to the Crow's Nest, she persuaded Alice and Beefy to stop long enough to take her over to The Hermitage. She felt that she and her friends were after all mere outsiders. She had never known Frederick Parsons, nor could she grieve as did those who had loved him, however shocked and distressed she might be by the tragedy of his return. It was best for her to leave.

An hour later she was standing beside the roadster, still dazed by the shock of the event. She could find no words to detain them, however hard she might try.

Beefy Harford was at the wheel. They were about to say good-bye to Carol under the big maples at the entrance to the back lane at The Hermitage. Beefy's hazel eyes were red and she sniffed occasionally. Alice sat pale and quiet beside her, all her gay banter quenched and her intelligent eyes grave.

"We won't see you until November, I suppose," she said to Carol, who stood by the car, shading her eyes from the sun. "I'll write and report progress, and

Beefy will do the same. Let's hear from you whenever you have time."

"And don't work too hard on those temple fans for me," added Beatrice. "I can wait. You're pretty busy, I guess."

Carol tried to think of some last word that would delay them: she was reluctant to see them go. There was nothing she could think of; her mind was in a turmoil. So much had happened this afternoon. "Well, I suppose we'll have to say good-bye," she began.

"Wait a moment," interposed Beatrice. "There's a car coming in. We will be in their way. Oh, it's your Mr. Hoyt and Major Walton. I thought we'd get away before they came. I hope they don't stop to speak to us!"

Carol knew that it was an excess of sympathy that prompted the words. Poor Beefy was not good at expressing herself. Her handkerchief was wet with the flood of tears she had shed all the way over from the Crow's Nest. She was not to be saved the encounter, however.

The approaching car slowed and stopped directly beside them, and Mr. Hoyt leaned forward to address the two girls in the roadster.

"I hurried over to ask if you two young ladies won't stop over-night with Miss Breck?" he said, courteously. "It is growing late for you to start on a long drive. I don't like the idea of that lonely road through the mountains. Let me persuade you, Miss Whelen."

"It's awfully kind of you but——" Alice began dubiously. She, too, did not feel like encountering the flying shadows of the Seven Lakes Road after what she had seen at the Crow's Nest.

"Do consider it," Hoyt urged. "If only to keep Miss Breck company. We have come over, the Major and I, to get my over-night kit. We are going to take Biggs with us up to Westfield—Parsons' native place—I shouldn't be able to get along without his help, and the house will be rather empty for a day or so. I wish you could stay even longer."

"Isn't Mrs. Biggs coming back, either?" Carol broke out. "Is she going, too?" but Mr. Hoyt did not answer. He was waiting for Alice to speak.

"We'd love to stay," Alice said slowly. "We'll have to send some message, though. You see, we said we were just going for a drive, to try out the car."

"Don't you trouble about that," exclaimed the Major. "I'll step out and manage that for you. Hoyt, you'll have to tell me again where that bag of yours is. I know where I keep my own things, can lay my hands on them in the dark, but I find other people are apt to have them laid about anywhere."

"Wait a moment, please, Major Walton," Beefy turned to Mr. Hoyt. "If Carol might go back with us . . ."

"Surely," Mr. Hoyt agreed without stopping to hear the end. "Take her up with you for a day or two. I'll see that her fare is taken care of for the return trip. She deserves more than that for what she has done for me, for us all. Stay here to-night and take her with you to-morrow. Mrs. Biggs will be back in an hour," he added to Carol. "She will give you a good dinner and fix up Miss Burk's room for your friends."

Beefy was out of the car and at the Major's side. "Would you mind if I came along to the telephone?" she asked. "I'll get the number and then you can talk. It'll save your time, if you are in a hurry. And, please, would you tell them why we are staying? I had an engagement with Miss Dillon, my tutor, for an hour early to-morrow morning, and she's a sort of a female dragon. You know the kind," and she smiled at him through her watery eyes.

Mr. Hoyt slipped over to the driving seat, turned the car and came close to the other side of the motor where Alice still sat. Carol was between the two machines, and she started to step back to allow him to talk to Alice, as she thought he had turned the car for that purpose. He halted her.

"Miss Whelen will pardon a bit of business between us two, I am sure," he said and his deep eyes were like two stars as he handed her a small roll of bills. "This is only a small fraction of what I should like to give you, Miss Breck. You have, as I said just now, done more than we can ever repay. Please have a good time. I shall be back day after to-morrow, I hope." He turned to Alice. "I wish I could help you out in the old-style, conventional way, Miss Whelen. The next time you come down, I shan't sit still, I promise you, and let you lug your own bags—but, no, you haven't any bags. The next time you will have, I hope. You'll stay longer."

Carol was grateful for such generosity but she could say nothing as she accepted the proffered money. She was in the state that accepts without protest whatever comes. She could no more voice her gratitude than she could, a few minutes ago, find excuses to keep the girls with her.

She gradually recovered as the hours sped by, and life took on its more normal aspect. By the time they were going to bed she was clear-headed and calm again, though she still felt that laughter was far off. The night had turned unseasonably cold and Mrs. Biggs had made a small fire on the dining-room hearth and they had toasted marshmallows and talked seriously of their aims and ambitions and ideals—for the tragedy of the afternoon had made them all thoughtful—and had planned long vistas of fruitful endeavors until they were too sleepy to keep their lids from drooping.

Alice and Beefy were, to Beefy's great satisfaction, in Claire's big bed and Carol, because she was the least bulky, was on the couch near by. Beefy was drifting off and Carol's eyes were closing when Alice's voice brought them back.

"I told you I had a feeling that it was a woman who stole that fan," she crowed softly. Carol had given them the history of the recovery of the fan while they were at dinner. "When I have a feeling, it always comes true."

Beefy was fumbling for something on the floor on her side of the bed. "I've got a feeling that I'm going to slam this shoe at anybody that wakes me up again," she said. "And when I have that sort of a feeling, it always comes true."

Carol laughed involuntarily and then settled down again. She remembered the roll of dollar bills. She had put them in her desk, in the little secret drawer, without counting them. There would be enough for the return trip. She thought she had noticed a bit of blue paper sticking out of the roll as she had put it in the drawer. To-morrow she would see.

CHAPTER XX

A FEW WORDS ABOUT MR. CARTER

MR. RICHARD C. CARTER was very tired of the room in the police station where he sat. He did not think much of the methods of questioning employed by these officials. He had told a straight story and they didn't believe him. They were so used to hearing lies that they didn't know the truth when they heard it. They had kept him in this hard wooden chair in this quiet room for twenty-four hours, and every time he was on the point of dropping off to sleep someone had roused him. He was alone now for the first time and he meant to take advantage of the fact. He settled himself in the uncomfortable chair.

"They think they've got me, and that I'll tell them all about the Hoyt robbery," his dazed mind spun out. "I don't know anything about the robbery. I wasn't there. I didn't know they were doing the job."

His golden head drooped to one side and blissful stupor stole over him again. This time they were not going to disturb him. This time ——

"Going to talk yet, brother?" a sonorous voice demanded and a hand was on his shoulder. "Better talk and have done with it. You'll do it in the end, you know. There's a good bed waiting for you."

Richard Carter straightened himself with an effort. "I'm not sleepy," he declared. "Go take a nap yourself, if you feel like it."

"That's all right, brother," returned the man in a changed tone. "I was just joshin' you. They want you to step out there," with a nod towards the outer room. "They've got a little surprise for you."

Carter stood up. "Delighted, old top—I need exercise," he said with an effort at jocularity that taxed him heavily. "Anything for a change of scene, as the actor said when he fell through the trap-door and landed below stage. Nothing will surprise me, you may be sure."

Nevertheless he was genuinely surprised when he learned that he was to be released, subject to call if necessary. They had come at last to believe his story. He almost dropped when he realized he was free.

They told him nothing of the injured Shorty and he was left to understand that no word had come from the hospital since the last bulletin he had heard read out—"as well as could be expected." He did not ask any questions but wrote down his address for future reference.

The man who had been his last interrogator handed him his hat and cane with a good-natured chuckle. "I guess you're all right," he said. "I was tryin' to tell these fellows you was hidin' something out on us, but I guess I was wrong. G'night. See you later, maybe; if we nabs those guys, we'll need you, you know, to identify them before we ship them off to Chi."

Carter took the cane and hooked it on his arm. He wanted to rush out before anyone stopped him. He knew they had tapped the cane to see if it were solid and had found no fault with it, yet he was glad when he was on the street. He put as much distance between himself and the station as his weary feet would permit, and then he found the address he had given them, a lodging-house which he had frequented occasionally.

It was in the poorer part of the city and was extremely plain and cheap but it was clean. The bed he got was in a little room on the fourth floor. The place was quiet enough considering its location. He heard some fumbling steps on the attic stair as he took off his coat. Old Swayze, the drunken lodger in the attic, was finding his way to his lair. Carter remembered him vaguely as a poor, broken-spirited chap with bald pate and weak blue eyes.

He did not think about Swayze again until the next day when he was making ready to go out. He put the finishing touches to his toilet, smoothed his shining hair, rearranged his tie, settled his coat and then carefully adjusted his hat. He looked at himself in the mirror which sent back a wavering distorted reflection of his handsome head and shoulders.

He looked at the reflection with absent eyes; his mind was apparently not on his appearance, although he had gone through the usual motions of dressing with care.

"I reckon I'm about ready," he thought, with a certain amount of nervous action in his throat. "I'll take it there and give it up. If they think I stole it, I'll have to try to find Claire, even if she has gone back on me. She hasn't answered a line since she sent that note."

He thought of the brief note that had come to him about a week after he had tried to make his escape from the city. It did not make any mention of his own affectionate epistle but merely stated that the writer was done with him and was leaving the country. She hoped he would get what he deserved, though she had done much better for it. A puzzling note, but Claire had always been a bit hard. He did not want to see her, but he made up his mind that he would hunt her out if worse came to worst and prove his alibi by her.

"I'll tell them that I was sent to find out what they'd got there that was valuable, and that I reported there was nothing worth while. I was fooled by that fake Princess saying they were on the lookout to buy old family stuff. I ought to have known better. Then they got me in too deep, with those ten-dollar bills. I'd passed two without knowing it."

He went on, staring at himself with unseeing eyes. "That game is over for keeps. I've been a fool. I haven't been a rogue. I'll go through with it and take what's coming. Then I'll make a fresh start for good and all."

He straightened himself as if to face an ordeal, halted by the one poor chair, and frowned.

"Where is it? I put it here not ten minutes ago. It was locked in the closet all night."

He knew he had hung the crook-necked cane on the chair-back just before he dived into his closet for the change that had dropped out of his coat pocket: money was scarce enough to make every cent valuable to him. His door was not locked. Since he meant to go out in another minute, he had not bothered to lock it when he came from the dingy bathroom.

"It was here," he insisted. "I know I put it on the chair."

He searched every corner, looked under the bed and bureau, and finally gave it up. The cane was gone. He went over a list of the possible avenues of disappearance, counting them on his well-manicured fingers. It narrowed down to two.

"The Princess may have a friend spying about in this house," he thought with a frown. "Or it may be Swayze. He'd do anything to get a few pennies. He isn't quick enough, though. He's a shaky sort of scarecrow. I'll try Swayze first. He's right under my hand."

The landlady had not seen the attic lodger that day. "He's been roostin' up in his room since yesterday mornin'," she told Carter. "I guess he's down on his luck. He ain't been workin' for two days. You go right up if you want to see him. You might tell him I'd like a dollar or two of that back rent he owes."

Carter went up two steps at a time, though the stair was not too firm. The grimed batten-door at the head of the stair was open and the poor room stood revealed to the most careless glance. Carter went in, nevertheless, and poked about in every nook and corner. He could not afford to take chances.

He went downstairs and met the landlady in the lower hall.

"He's not there," he told her. "Where does he work, when he does work?"

"Over on the Avenoo, at the corner grocery," she answered without undue emotion. "He's off for a whiles, I guess. He's odd man around there, does errands and sweeps out. Friedman doesn't need him full time."

Carter went to the grocery shop. Mr. Friedman was smilingly regretful.

"He ain't been here for two days," he assured Carter, wiping his hands on his soiled apron. "I ain't got the business, y'see, to keep a big force. Next year, mebbe, I'll go in heavy. I've just opened up this summer, y'see. Sorry. Any message? He'll be back in a day or two. No? Well, good day. Come again. I'm puttin' in a new line of pickled fish. . . . Very tasty fish . . ."

Richard Carter walked down the crowded avenue with a quick firm step. He did not know where he was going, just at first: by the time he had passed the second cross street, however, his mind had cleared and he had determined on a course of action.

"I'll start in right here in the neighborhood," he thought. "He may have had the cunning to go over to the other side of town with it, but it's more likely he's gone to the first place he saw. I'll try them all."

He swung about and went across the street to a dingy shop with suit-cases and overcoats hanging in its doorway and a number of odd articles in its dirty window. "I've got to get it back again," he said to himself. "Just *got* to get it."

Three days later he walked wearily into the lane that led to a small frame house. He had not dreamed at the outset that old Swayze would have proved so difficult to run to earth. The old man had managed to keep just ahead of him in the chase. Why the drunkard had fled so continuously from him, Carter could not understand. Little as he knew of the man, he had believed that he would be easily come up with. Yet for three warm summer days he had been trailing him through a maze of shifts and turns, always on the brink of putting hands upon him and always missing him by a hair's breadth.

"One thing is sure," he thought as he wiped his forehead. "He hasn't had the chance to dispose of the cane if he didn't manage it at the last village. They all told me he had a cane. Well, here we are. The woman at the cross-road told me he'd come here. Jove, what a ruin!"

He walked to the door of the desolate, sagging, weather-beaten house and knocked briskly. He could see the whole neglected half-acre of weedy ground and no one could escape from the house without detection. He knocked again and waited.

"If he isn't here, I'm about done," he thought. "And it looks as if he weren't here. A closed door on a day like this looks like an empty house to me."

He wiped his forehead and looked about. The poverty of the spot disheartened him. Had old Swayze trudged all the way to this forlorn refuge through all the heat of the last few days in the hope of shelter and found it locked and desolate like this? He began to feel sorry for Swayze. He was dead beat himself. Fifty miles tracking a man who had wandered about as Swayze had done was no light task. He had been compelled to walk, since he might otherwise miss his quarry.

He frowned at the silent desolate cabin. "If he's gone on," he thought, "he may go for to-day. I'm about through for a while."

He went over to a rickety seat under the stunted apple-tree. It was shady there and he could cool off a bit. He sat down with a long breath of relief, and his spirits rose one small degree above zero.

"If that old badger has cut off to ——" he began.

The flicker of something inside the dirty window-pane had caught his eye. He got up and walked to the rear of the cabin. The ramshackle door stood slightly ajar.

He walked in.

Old Swayze looked up from the bunch of old quilts where he lay. His withered face wore an expression of welcome, and he immediately began to mumble apologies for not having a chair to offer. He struggled up into a sitting posture.

"I got some coffee in the pot there," he indicated a battered coffee-pot on the rusty stove. "I'll light up a fire and we'll have a snack. It ain't so hot, after you've rested a bit."

Carter saw that he kept an anxious eye upon the tattered bedding, and he went to the point at once.

"You may as well give me the cane, Swayze," he said firmly. "I've come all this way, as you know well, to get it. Hand it over."

"My gosh a-mighty! You ain't goin' to take it back to him?" squeaked the old man. "I ain't goin' to let ye take it back to him. He stole it off me last month. Leastways he took it off me. He never gave me nothin' fer it, neither, jest *took* it. And all it had in it, too. No, you can't have it, not if you choke me fer it."

Carter sat down suddenly on an empty wooden box nearby. This was too much for him.

"What do you mean by 'all it had in it'?" he asked, dully. "Why did Shorty take it from you? Where did you get a cane like that?"

Swayze cocked his head on one side like a dilapidated bird. "You got me where I've got to talk," he remarked and stuck his thin shanks out before him in a hopeless way. "I'll tell you. That cane was give me by the parson over yonder," he motioned vaguely towards the village church seen through the cobwebbed window. "Some folks give it to him but it was too sporty fer him, so, bein's I was lame last year, he give it to me when I was down a-visitin' fer a day. I was helpin' a med'cine-show feller, and we travelled a lot. Done three towns around here in one day ——"

"That's all right, but get on about Shorty. I'm in a hurry," interposed Carter in a patient tone. The old chap was a ruin, sure enough.

"I'm comin' to him," Swayze rambled on, taking his time. "That med'cine feller was a magician, and he fixed up the cane fer me. I ust to lend it to him fer tricks, y'know. Shorty seen him one night this June doin' tricks with it over to Smithtown, and next day he made up to me. Took me back to town with him. I allus liked the town. And Mrs. McGinnis' house, too. Then Shorty nabbed it off me and said he'd do me up if I blabbed. I couldn't do nothin'. I couldn't go after it, see? But when I seen it, like it had come to me there on the chair, I wasn't missin' no chanct."

He bent nearer and whispered in a ghostly way, "Papers in it, too. Papers fer this here house. My father's house it ust to be. They're there if Shorty ain't swiped 'em. You ain't give me the chanct to see, yes or no, runnin' after me so fast."

"So that's why you didn't pawn it as I thought you would," exclaimed Carter. "The deed for this house! Can you beat that!"

It took a good deal of argument and persuasion, however, to convince Swayze that Carter did not want to seize the cane and make off with it. He brought it out from under the covers at last and insisted on removing the handle, while Carter looked on.

He gave up the effort and allowed his visitor to do the work. He sank back on the bed, drowsing and waking by turns, indifferent to what was going on before his drooping lids. He woke up when Carter shook him, and he took the cane in his trembling hands. He gave a howl when he found the cane was empty and though Carter assured him that there had been no paper in the cane and even showed him the yellow stiffened mass of corn-starch from which the spoon had been recovered, he was not convinced. He began to weep.

"I'll have a nice thing on my hands now," thought poor Richard Carter. "It's just one trouble after another. Suppose he calls in the village and accuses me . . ."

Swayze did no such thing. He stopped his wailing as abruptly as he had begun, and looked up at Carter with a watery smile. His enfeebled brain had made a direct about-face. "Say," he whispered slyly, "there wasn't no use in that there paper, anyways. Pop sold the house and a hoss and cart thirty years ago to old Harvey and he's been on his travels this many a year. Don't you worry about that paper, Mister. Tell Shorty I fooled him good."

Richard suddenly realized the truth. "He's crazy. He's crazy and I've got to see that he's taken care of. I can't let the poor old chap here to die alone, or be taken to ——"

He came closer to the old man. "Shorty is dying in a hospital—an accident," he said clearly. "I saw it in the newspaper yesterday. You'd better come along with me and I'll find a place for you where you'll be taken care of. I know a man in the next town who'll look after you for a while."

It was no good. He had to leave him at last. All he could do was to send some food to him from the village shop and notify the doctor who lived in the brick house by the store.

"He'll be taken care of," he thought as he started on his pilgrimage again. "He won't last long, poor old Swayze. I'd like to see him through but it isn't as if I had any money or time, either. I'm a little pressed for time, and that's putting it mildly."

He felt the spoon in his inner pocket and the fact seemed to lift the weight from his tired feet. Once again he was on his way.

CHAPTER XXI

CAROL MEETS MRS. McCALL

CAROL, as she went along the platform in Broad Street Station, counted the money she had left from the portion of the sum given her which she had dedicated to her trip. She knew that she had spent too much on a package of brass binding for the temple fans, but she had soothed her conscience by planning economy in car-fare. She meant to take the trolley. She had plenty of time. It would be cooler, too, on the street-cars.

"I'd have to wait an hour at the Terminal, and that's the hottest place I know on such an afternoon as this. And then there'd be another wait at Lansdale. I'll be a lot more comfortable," she argued, as if rehearsing for explanation to Mr. Hoyt.

She felt well content with her choice as she rode along. She had a seat to herself and there was a breeze, she was on the shady side of the car and there were some amusing people who got on or off at intervals. A man in new clothes with the tag still on his unconscious back, a fat woman with three huge baskets who argued with the conductor and triumphed, a little girl with a small kitten that would not stay in its pasteboard box but insisted on getting out and parading up and down the shoulders of two indulgent, round-shouldered farmers in the seat ahead.

At Chelton Avenue a nice young woman got on. She took the only seat vacant, a sunny one ahead of and across the aisle from Carol. She was dressed with taste and care. She took no notice of the other passengers but opened a book and began to read. Carol, always interested in books, tried in vain to see the title. The car was filling and people passed or stood in the aisle so that the book was obscured just at the moment when its unconscious owner turned it so that Carol might have read the caption at the top of the page.

As the car went northward, the passengers dropped off, one by one, until the seat ahead of Carol was empty. The attractive young woman moved over at once and opened her book again. Carol bent forward to get a glimpse of the title, and had a shock.

"Exactly alike," she thought, with a thrill. "The same white moons and the same kind of fingers."

The hands holding the book were those of the Princess Bulono. A strange coincidence. Two pairs of hands with the same white marks—not half-moons, they were more than that—three-quarter moons, Carol called them to herself. Unusual to find two pairs of hands with such nails.

"This one is taller, though," thought Carol. "She has glorious Titian hair, too ——"

What was it that Mr. Parsons had said about the girl whom he had called Miss Jordon—the girl who had sent him to M. Harfleur? Red hair, he had said. Well, a man would call this beautiful burning color by that crude name. Yes, it was red; not black, like the Princess Bulono's had been.

The young woman turned and met Carol's eyes. Was it imagination or did she start? If she did it was only a momentary flicker of the small, quick grey eyes. She did not evade Carol's earnest scrutiny. On the contrary, she opened a conversation, on the strength of an inquiry as to the time.

"I haven't any watch," Carol told her, pleasantly. "I imagine the conductor can tell you." As she spoke she read the name on the cover of the book, *The Chester Lane Case.*

The other noticed the direction of her glance and smiled. "It isn't very wonderful reading, is it?" she asked, and she turned quite around to face Carol. "I read better stuff than that. Just at this time, though, I need—well, suppose I come over to your seat and have a chat. I get off at the Abington Hospital. My husband is coming out to-day, and I'm so excited about it. It takes a real thriller to keep me interested to-day."

Carol moved over with alacrity. She was not averse to a chat. She knew she had been mistaken about this girl, and yet she had an obstinate undercurrent of desire to sift and examine her, to make certainty doubly sure.

"Has your husband been very ill?" she asked, just to keep the talk going. There really was no need for her to make an effort; the young woman told her everything.

"We were married last spring and had such a cute little shack up on the Neshaminy, you know that place near Hatboro? well, and everything was lovely, when George took ill with the flu. He got over that and I thought we'd take an apartment in Germantown, nearer to his work. Well, about a week ago, we were just going to move in. We were out for a walk—he isn't so very strong yet and has to take long walks for his health—when he was run over by a car."

"Run over?" exclaimed Carol, properly shocked. "How dreadful."

"Not entirely run over, you understand," the other went on in her curious high, piping voice that was like the voice assumed by readers of children's parts. "Just his foot. It was pretty bad, though. He'll have to walk with crutches for a while. But I'm not worrying, so long as I have George home again. Where do you get out? Perhaps you'd rather have the aisle seat, if you get out first."

Carol made a leap in the dark. She had a feeling, as Alice might have said. "Why, I am going to the hospital, too," she said. "I have an errand there. With Dr. Byrnes."

"Byrnes?" repeated the girl. "I've heard that name. Oh, yes, the nurse told me he was a visitor here, brought patients in, or something. He isn't in the accident wards, though. That's where George is. I brought him right over. I made the taxi-driver who ran over him bring him straight in here. My, but he was mad. He'll get soaked for a good bill, I can tell you. Here's our street. We may as well go along in together, since we're bound for the same place."

They walked up Woodland Avenue under the shade of the trees and went around the curving drive into a wide concrete space, on every side of which were buildings and building materials, plaster boxes and heaps of sand which was marked with white parking lines. The girl talked incessantly. She told Carol her name was Elizabeth McCall—Mrs. George William McCall—and that she lived on Woodbine Avenue, that she was sort of tired of city life and wanted to get out into the country.

She got more excited as they approached the building with a large white sign with ENTRANCE on it in black letters, and on the concrete pavement before it, larger white letters—NO PARKING.

"But this is the Accident ward!" exclaimed Carol. "I want to go in the Main Entrance."

"It's a main entrance, now while the building is going on," the girl told her. "It's been this way all summer. There isn't any other entrance. You just follow me."

She led the way through the main door, with Carol behind her. She seemed quite genuinely Mrs. George William McCall, of Woodbine Avenue, Germantown, Philadelphia. Carol began to feel silly.

There was no open hallway nor any office, as Carol had expected. A narrow corridor with offices on either side, showed white-jacketed doctors busy with nervous patients whose answers were taken down by a competent nurse who sat at the same desk: on the benches in the corridor bandaged patients, young and old, waited their turn to be ushered into the offices and to sit on the same chair of interrogation. Nurses went up and down, speaking to a person here and there. One of them, a pleasant looking girl with a mole on her cheek came forward.

"Well, Mrs. McCall, have you come for him so soon? Doctor said he could go at four, and it's only three," she said in a warm Irish voice. "It'll be long for you, to be sure. He says, Mr. McCall says, 'She'll be here on time, sure,' and so you are. Doctor's just begun to bandage his foot. Will you come along?"

Mrs. McCall hesitated. "It sort of makes me sick to see him bandage that foot," she confessed. "I'll go, though. A wife's place is by her husband. Good-bye, Miss Breck. I hope I'll see you again. Come out to see me when you get an afternoon off. It's not so far from Warrington, at that. You'll remember the place, Woodbine Avenue, The Laurels. Good-bye."

Carol stood uncertain and puzzled. All her doubts rose up one by one. How had that girl known her name, when she had not told her who she was nor where she lived? Those queer nails, and the thick white fingers . . .

"Mr. McCall is really much better. He can get along with only one crutch to-day. Ah, it's hard on the poor fellow."

The pleasant Irish nurse had stopped on her way back: she thought it would cheer the pretty friend of that little Mrs. McCall to hear the good news. She added, "Dr. Byrnes is in the operating room. He just brought a patient, a last minute case."

"I'm glad of that," Carol smiled. She wished she might ask some questions but she could not summon the wit. "About Mr. McCall, I mean."

"He's crazy about home, that lad," the nurse went on. "He can hardly wait till he's made ready. Poor soul, he needs that foot, since it's the best one he has."

Carol found a question. "I—I met him once, I think," she hazarded. "He has something the matter with the other foot, hasn't he?" She was prepared to take back her guess if need be.

The nurse nodded. "Club foot, bad operation," she said absently with her eye on a child that had strayed from its bandaged mother. "Not that it troubles him much. He can dance a jig on it, he says. But it makes him look bad, a fine chap like that. . . . Here, you Gladys, don't go over there. Doctor won't like it," and she dashed off in pursuit of the wanderer who was toddling into one of the offices.

Carol felt a tightening of her throat. Red hair, white-moon finger-nails, a twisted foot. . . . What should she do? She needed advice, and that without delay. Dr. Byrnes? He would be occupied for another fifteen minutes, at least. Who could be trusted?

"I know," she thought in a flash of memory. "The Major's friend. That Mr. Henderson. He'll know what to do. He's right next door, too."

She went, not by the York Road but by the back way, taking a short cut behind the buildings among the heaps of bricks, lumber, and débris. She felt as if the many windows of the hospital were filled with faces watching her, as if she would be halted by some accomplice who might spring from behind a pile of lumber to seize her; her heart pounded and her breath came fast; she thought she would never reach the neat, solid stone building.

Carol poured out her story to the kind-faced man at the desk in the Station. Mr. Henderson was helpful and attentive, and she tried to make the recital clear. She ended with great earnestness.

"They are over at the hospital in the accident ward. She is going to take him away as soon as the doctor finishes bandaging his foot. They may be ready to go now."

Carol trembled with excitement. She had told Mr. Henderson as briefly as she could of her meeting with the Princess Bulono and with Mrs. George William McCall, of the marks on which she based her accusation. She was on pins and needles at his calm deliberate manner of asking his questions.

"You say she has the same marks on her finger-nails and the same small eyes, though you did not see the Princess very clearly, owing to the room being dark on account of a headache from which the lady was suffering at the moment? Have you any other proofs?"

She shook her head and then suddenly remembered the slip of paper that had been among the dollar bills given her by Mr. Hoyt. She had put it in the little side-pocket of her wrist-bag. She fished it out in great haste. "This . . ." she began.

He had it in his fingers and was looking at it through a reading glass before she could say more. He read the words written on the margin, "Reproduction of finger-prints taken from the jimmy found by C. Breck, July 17."

She tried to explain how she had come into possession of the bit of paper, but he paid no attention to her. He gave instructions to the officer who appeared and by the time he turned to her again, a car was speeding out of the garage at the back of the wide well-kept parking space behind the Station-house. It swung out into the York Road and moved up to the next cross-road where it turned in under the trees that lined the entrance to the hospital.

"Now," he said with a smile, "we will soon see if your suspicions have any foundation. As you heard, I warned Johnson to proceed with caution, in case this couple really were Mr. and Mrs. McCall of Germantown. I think I'll get a little information from the home nest, while we wait."

He took up the telephone and, after a short delay, got the house on Woodbine Avenue; The Laurels. He nodded over the receiver to Carol as he listened to the reply that came with the utmost promptness over the wire.

"Well, they make good so far," he remarked, as he hung up and swung about in his chair to face her. "Mrs. McCall has been there only a short time. She came in from Neshaminy where they had a bungalow. The man has had the flu and it was necessary for him to be near his work. He had an accident just before his wife took the apartment, but is coming back there to-day. That's as straight as you want them."

Carol's heart sank. She felt that she had made a serious mistake in rushing to such fantastic conclusions. "I suppose it was foolish of me," she began.

"Not at all," he said genially. "If we believed every straight story we heard, there would be mighty few birds in our coops. Bless you, we don't care about their stories; we're after *facts.* And don't worry about dragging Hoyt's name into it. If these two are the people we're after, the counterfeit charge is enough. That's a federal offence, you know. The rest can follow. Their home-nest is in Chicago, so it'll be likely that they've got their outfit hidden somewhere there."

"Do you think they have the rest of the spoons?" she asked, hopefully.

He shook his head. "Likely they've shipped them off by someone, when they ran away," he said frowning in thought. "They meant to keep them and doctor them up, I guess, but there wasn't time. And they wouldn't want to keep them with them. Yet, on the other hand, there's a chance they didn't want to make any move. We'll have them in and, if we can identify them, we can ship them straight to the U. S. Commissioner in Chicago. If it works, we won't have even to delay to send them to the Federal Building in the city," he added as he left her to go into the other room.

Carol was feeling rather troubled. She had heard Hoyt vow only that morning that he would withdraw the charge, since he had his old distaste of publicity full upon him again. She wondered if she had acted too rashly. The assurance that the robbery at The Hermitage need not be brought forward did not soothe her fears; she knew that, once started, such affairs went forward ruthlessly. She looked up at him eagerly as he returned.

"That finger-print is all right. It shows that one of the robbers was a fellow who has just died over in New York. Our man brought his prints over yesterday. A chauffeur who'd been hurt in a collision. Never regained consciousness. Too bad. He might have let in some light on the matter." He nodded at her. "That's one point settled. There were three of them, if not more. That young Carter identified the fellow as a man in their employ; said he'd seen him driving them about. The Princess and Dr. Scarelli, as he called them."

"And they've disappeared entirely," she murmured. "It's hardly possible that these McCalls ——"

"Better not try to settle that, until we've sifted them out," he advised, kindly. He tried to divert her with other details. "That Carter. He was a plucky chap, it seems. Stuck to it that he knew nothing about the pair, except in a social way. Hired to dance with the Princess, like those good-lookers often are when a dame is a stranger in a town. In fact, he put up a complaint they'd passed faked notes on him."

Carol had read of Carter's release in the newspaper and had felt more kindly towards the young man whom she had previously designated as a worm.

"Where is he now?" she asked mechanically. She was thinking of his letter to Claire and how dreadful it would be for him when he learned, as he would in time, that the girl he was prepared to marry had gone off with another man.

"Where they can put their hands on him you may be sure," replied Mr. Henderson genially. "Now, if you will go into that room over there you will be more comfortable. I'll call upon you when I've had a little chat with your friends. It won't be long before they'll be here now."

CHAPTER XXII

ANOTHER SUPPER ON THE TERRACE

MR. HOYT glanced at his watch.

"What time did you say Miss Breck told you she would be back?" he asked.

He was on the terrace in his wheel-chair. An hour ago when he had returned from his journey to Westfield, he had felt too weary to keep on his feet. The wheel-chair was a comfortable vehicle as well as a restful couch when he chose to lie back in it. He needed it only at intervals and yet there was nothing like it when he was tired as he was now.

He flung down the newspaper he had been reading and yawned. There had been no fresh developments in the criminal world that interested him particularly. The Harper Case had dropped out of the public eye. He sighed. "I'll telephone the Major as soon as I am sure he'll be at home," he thought, on an impulse. "I'm sick of the whole thing. It gets on my nerves. I'll be done up, if it keeps on. I'll notify him first and then withdraw my charges. That's what I'll do." He hardly heard Biggs' reply to his question about Carol.

Biggs was setting the table for a supper on the terrace, Mr. Hoyt having declared he had no appetite for a hot dinner on this warm August evening. He put the knives and forks down carefully and then glanced towards the big maples of the back entrance.

"She'd ought to be here before this, Mr. Hoyt," he replied. "She's not one to be behind-hand, neither. I hope them thieves haven't got her. They might have it in for her. Do you want tea or coffee and, if tea, will it be iced? Alfreda says."

"Coffee, good and hot, too," replied Mr. Hoyt absently. "That's nonsense about Miss Breck. They don't kidnap people . . . there she comes now, Biggs. I told you she'd be along all right."

Biggs did not say aloud what he thought: it was only when he had left the terrace that he allowed himself to mutter beneath his breath, "There *has* been cases, yes, many a one. Only I can't just remember right now, on the dot, as you may say. I'll keep an eye on the newspapers, though, and I'll find such a one, yes, sir."

He told his wife that Miss Breck was back and he guessed they could take up the food. "Everything's ready out on the terrace," he said. "And Mr. Alan's sort of wore out. We'd best get it on in a hurry."

Mrs. Biggs uncovered the pan of brown biscuits that she had kept warm this long hour. "I don't guess they'll be quite so light as they ought to be. I'm rejoiced she is back. It seems like she's been away a mortal long time. I don't know when two days have been so draggy. I'll miss her when she goes for good. Even if Mr. Alan is getting well . . . Poor Mr. Parsons . . . I'm glad Mr. Alan has ordered a fine monument to him and right enough too—with not a soul left to mourn him except Mr. Alan and us; and the Major, of course."

Alpheus took the urn and disappeared. He came back in another minute, waving an excited hand. "Don't take them dishes out of the heater," he commanded. "Mr. Alan wants us to come out there; both of us. Never mind your apron. You look all right. It's something Miss Breck has to tell."

Mrs. Biggs moved swiftly, yet she managed to shed her checked gingham and appear in a neat frilled white apron as she followed her husband out onto the terrace. She had looked forward to a different meeting with her favorite young lady than this, but she knew how to conduct herself. She stopped just over the door-sill and waited.

Carol sat in the low chair opposite her employer, the same chair in which the Major had sat on the last occasion when they had supped on the terrace. Her cheeks were flushed and her black-fringed eyes shone with excitement. She sat erect and, as Mrs. Biggs said afterward, "She looked like she'd found a fortune, nothing less."

Mr. Hoyt nodded to the husband and wife. "I want you both to hear what Miss Breck has to tell," he said kindly. "We are all of us interested in this affair, and it is better to hear the first-hand version of an event than to be told of it by someone who was not an eye-witness. Miss Breck, will you begin at the beginning, please? Take your time. We'd rather have a spoiled supper than to miss any detail, however small."

Carol drew a deep breath and her eyes narrowed in memory. " I came out on the trolley all the way from town," she began and went on to give them a clear account of all that had happened up to the moment that Mr. Henderson had dispatched the car to the hospital. " You did not know you had given me a slip of blue paper which the Major must have given you," she addressed Mr. Hoyt. " I didn't know it was among the notes you gave me until I was in bed that night, and then we went off so early the next morning that I simply grabbed the money from my desk and put it in my bag. I didn't look at it again until I was nearly up to Pompton, and then I took out the roll of money to fold separately——"

" Yes, women fold notes up in a small, neat way, while men either lay them flat in their wallets or roll them in a bundle, I've noticed that," broke in Mr. Hoyt. " That note you found at the feed-mill, Alph, was folded that way and it belonged to Mrs. Mead, remember? "

Carol went on, hardly noticing the interruption. " I found that piece of paper and put it in my bag. I knew it was the Major's, of course. It was on his blue paper. I meant to give it to him the moment I saw him; after forgetting the card in my desk for so long, I vowed I'd not forget anything again."

" And that paper must have been among the notes he gave me just before—before Parsons came back," Mr. Hoyt once more interrupted. " He paid his share on some farm-stuff, I remember, and took the notes out of his desk. I had not counted them over, as I usually do. But that's beside the question. What did you do then?"

"I gave it to Mr. Henderson and he was tremendously glad to get it. He said afterward that he had just got some prints taken in the hospital in New York. A chauffeur had been hurt in an accident and hadn't been identified at first. Mr. Carter, Claire's Cousin Dick, you know, had told them that the man was a driver for the Princess Bulono and they investigated and found he was one of the men they'd been looking for for a long time. His face had been cut and it was bandaged and he was unconscious, so it wasn't any wonder they didn't know who he was. He was the very man we saw hurt that day."

"And who was it?" demanded Hoyt with an eager light in his eye, in spite of his vow to keep out of the affair. "I'd like to know the man who broke into my house and stole the spoons. I'd see that he got what he deserved."

"He's dead," she replied simply. "They called him Shorty. I don't remember his last name; it was queer. But that was told me after it was all over and I was terribly excited. Mr. Henderson has it all written down."

It had not been pleasant, she told them, to face the two when they were brought into the Station. She would have felt sorrier for the sham Princess if she had behaved differently. "She simply laughed at them," she explained, with her grey eyes wide. "Imagine what a hard sort of a girl she must be not to care. She said they couldn't prove anything on her and that I was mistaken. She said she'd never laid eyes on me before and that they'd not find anything at The Laurels that wasn't what it ought to be. She kept saying that all the time, and she seemed sure of it. We had to wait a good while for the men to come back from The Laurels and when she saw the stuff they had—some jewelry, three or four bundles of bank notes and some other things—she insisted that it was a trick; a frame-up, she called it. Even when they'd taken his finger-prints and found that his right hand little finger had the same markings as the print they had on a counterfeit ten-dollar note, and he gave in and confessed, she would keep on saying it was all a trick of the police; that the detectives were out to get somebody and they'd happened to light on a perfectly respectable couple,—that's what she called herself and that other wretch."

"She's up against heavy odds," Mr. Hoyt said thoughtfully. "There are many charges against that gang, if they are a gang. A score of frauds, many thefts of rare precious stones, the making of counterfeit money, and the famous Standing-cup affair. I understand that Harper, the owner, has vowed he'd spend every cent he has to get the man who ruined his treasure by changing it."

"The man was terribly excited," she went on. "He kept saying his foot was only patched up, that it wasn't any good. He told her he was done for but she only laughed at him. That made him angry and he said he'd talk when they got out to Chicago—Mr. Henderson told them he was going to send him out there as soon as he could get them off—and he said that there were only two of them now that the other man was dead."

"They'll have to face the District Attorney there," Mr. Hoyt said. "Yes, there'll be enough against them to satisfy their most vindictive victims. I'm glad you acted as you did, Miss Carol, in leaving my name out of it. To be called as a witness . . ." his voice trailed off wearily.

"And then Mr. Henderson sent me home in one of their cars, and I got out back on the pike so that you would not see me and guess there was something up, and I came straight in," she said, growing more excited.

She stopped as if that were all, and they looked at her in silence. Under her apparent finality they all sensed a climax. Mr. Hoyt said, "And then?"

She took up her travelling-bag which had stood on the floor beside her chair. "And then," she cried, joyfully, "and then, Mr. Hoyt and Mrs. Biggs and Alpheus, I lay this bundle down on the table here and ask Mr. Hoyt to open it."

Mr. Hoyt rolled his chair nearer to the table and, in solemn silence he untied the tapes that bound the soft bundle; Mrs. Biggs and Alph moved up close beside him, and Carol leaned forward in breathless anticipation.

Six old silver spoons with crude Gothic figures, each with a halo like a hat and with some emblem to explain their identity, lay on the cloth; six of the missing spoons.

"Six and six is twelve!" cried Biggs in great excitement. "Now we've got twelve of 'em. Can you beat that!" He was transformed by joy and slapped his wife on the back. "Look at that, old lady. I told you that four-leaf clover I found this mornin' was luck."

Mr. Hoyt took up the spoons, one by one, and examined them. He looked up at Carol with a shining face, held out his hand and as she laid hers in his palm shook it heartily. "You've given me back more than you can understand, Miss Breck," he said in a low voice. "These six spoons with the six that Parsons brought back will change the current of my life. I had told the Major not two hours ago that I would have to withdraw from my share in our arrangement. I had depended on securing at least some of the spoons, you see, and as the days went by without any sign of them, I began to realize my rashness. I had gone into the project without sufficient funds, relying on the sale of the spoons. Now, however, I can go on. I shall sell the twelve to a man who is eager to get such spoons, a multi-millionaire who will pay well for them. M'sieu Dobrovsky has been bombarding me for a description of my spoons. To-morrow you shall write a letter for me."

Carol felt a twinge of regret; she had come to feel a deep interest in the ancient Apostle spoons. "Must you write so soon? Couldn't you wait?" she burst out impetuously. "The Master spoon isn't here ——" She stopped, embarrassed; she was too officious, telling Mr. Hoyt what to do, and before the Biggs, too.

"I feel assured that we will never see the Master spoon," said Mr. Hoyt with conviction. "That spoon is the most valuable one of the set, as you all know——" he broke off to address Mrs. Biggs, "I should say, as the other two know. Since you have now seen these old spoons for the first time, you are not aware that the Master spoon is worth sometimes twice as much as one of the others." He turned to Carol again. "I fear that scoundrel Scarelli, or Brown or whatever his name is, has altered that spoon and disposed of it to some collector who wanted such a spoon badly. We shall never see the Master spoon again."

"And about how much, Mr. Hoyt, might a spoon like that be worth?" inquired Mrs. Biggs in an awed voice. "As much as a hundred dollars?"

"It could go as high as five thousand, or if two purchasers were bidding against each other, they'd pay even more," replied Mr. Hoyt, and he smiled at the blank astonishment of her small face. "We mustn't keep you here, though, now that you've heard the whole story. Miss Breck will want some supper; particularly after exciting experiences like she has gone through this afternoon. Alph, I wish you would go in and call the Crow's Nest. I want to ask the Major to come over at once, if he is at home. Don't say anything of all this, merely that we are having another tea-party on the terrace and want him to be here to share it."

After Biggs had disappeared grinning, he bent over the spoons again and took them up one by one. "Yes, St. Simon with his saw, and St. Peter with the key and St. John ——" he broke off suddenly and looked up at her. "Faith, you've done better for yourself than I thought, Miss Breck," he cried as if surprised by some discovery. "You've just about captured the reward that the Major and I offered for the return of the spoons. You are entitled to a part of it, at least. Six spoons—a little less than half. You're due to get about three hundred dollars."

Carol stared. Her face lighted and then grew sober. "I couldn't take it," she replied earnestly. "I only got six spoons back for you. Mr. Parsons brought the other six: and the Master spoon, that you said you'd rather have than the whole twelve, is gone. If I'd brought that back, too, it would have been different."

Mr. Hoyt dropped his eyes to the spoons again. He said nothing for a while. Just as Biggs was heard coming out with the tray, he remarked in a cheerful voice, "Yes, we must have a real party, Miss Breck. Next week. I'll consult Mrs. Biggs about it. I think it should be a house-party. Do you think those two jolly friends of yours could come down? It's quite a trip but they seem to like driving about."

Carol was glad he had not argued with her; she would have given in too easily, she feared. Three hundred dollars meant a great deal to her just now. She thought, "If I'd take it, though, I know I'd feel all wrong. Mother and Father wouldn't think it right, I'm sure."

"The Major says he'll be right over as soon as he finishes gettin' into his fresh clothes," Biggs announced as he set the tray on the footstool. "He'll be here, I should say, before you could say Jack Robinson. E-magine how he'll take it, Mr. Alan, after all the moil and worrit he's been in about this here robbery. He'll be fair lifted out of hisself, I'll warrant you. Yes, sir."

The Major arrived and the meal began without any more delay. The biscuit and other things had not suffered, as Mrs. Biggs had feared and, even if they had been less excellent than usual, no one would have noticed it; for all were intent on the story of the capture of the two adventurers. Carol went over each detail for his benefit. As usual, he kept up an appearance of judicial calm but he was really greatly excited. She had to repeat some of the incidents a number of times. He was particularly interested in the fact that his photostat had been of use at last.

"I was disappointed when nothing was found at that house in New York, where poor Parsons said he was detained, and the man whom that Carter fellow accused died without telling anything, but this makes up for all," he declared. "Six more of the spoons found and the thieves caught." He turned to Hoyt abruptly. "That note of his, nevertheless, has helped turn the trick; if he had not described the female person as having red hair, Miss Carol might not have risked following her. She said the Princess 'Bologny' had black hair, very natural wavy hair; a wig, of course, though it must have been very carefully worn to hide such a color as her natural hair is. Parsons put her on the scent, after all, didn't he, Miss Carol?"

"Indeed he did!" exclaimed Carol. "I wasn't going to risk it until I remembered that he had said her hair was red. Maybe it's only dyed red to disguise her for a while but it is certainly a lovely color, though she's a horrid wretch."

The Major set down his cup with a sigh. "That's the best coffee I had for a week, Alan," he remarked, as he broke one of the brown biscuits and began to butter it. "By the way, Miss Breck, there's one thing you haven't explained, and that is the fact that the fan was over there in Longman's all that time before the robbery. That is one thing I'd like to understand; how they managed that part of their game."

"Oh!" cried Carol in dismay. "I said I'd never forget anything again but I have. I was so excited about it, so sort of terrified at having to identify those two and tell all I knew about the robbery that I never thought of it. When the man confessed he had dropped the jimmy that night you were hurt, Mr. Hoyt, and she kept on insisting she had nothing to do with it all, I got mixed up. Don't you think that Longman's made a mistake? They might have got it mixed up, the date when they got the fan, you know."

"Hmm," said the Major and he frowned. "I'll look into that myself. A firm like that isn't liable to errors of that sort, though. I'm sorry you didn't mention it. You say that Henderson arrested them on the charge of passing counterfeit notes out on the Illinois highway and that he called in Buck Johnson to identify the man, and yet he never mentioned the robbery of the spoons? That's a mistake. He ought to have cleared that up at once, being a friend of ours."

"That is exactly as it should be," Mr. Hoyt's voice was firm. "I have gone back to my first position and insist on keeping out of this. I have now, not only the fan, but twelve of the spoons. I am satisfied."

The Major frowned. "That's all very good, I suppose. But how about the thirteenth spoon? Alan, are you willing to let that go? I should think you'd have to put in a charge; you have only twelve spoons, and there were thirteen."

"I've gone back to my old prejudices, Major," Hoyt insisted quietly. "Once again, I'm afraid of the limelight. I believe that the thirteenth spoon has been worked over and sold to some unsuspecting buyer at an enormous figure. I am almost positive of it. It is ruined, so far as I am concerned, for once an ancient silver article is cut by a modern graver's tool, it becomes a doubtful article even if the forger succeeds in passing it. If I got my Master spoon back, it would not be the same; it would be ruined, I tell you."

"But," began the Major, "but ——"

"Of course I shall try to get it back," Hoyt went on calmly. "I shall use every means to get it back, but I shall not enter any charge against those two. There are enough beside the Federal offence of counterfeiting, if, as Henderson says, they are the experts who stole the Standing Cup. A long list of forgeries and counterfeits, quite enough to keep them out of harm's way for at least a decade."

"Decade nonsense," fumed the Major. "You and your decades! When you get on your high horse, Alan Hoyt, I've no patience with you. Those villains ought to . . ."

"Don't excite yourself, Major," Hoyt interposed amiably. "Tell us what you think of my latest fancy; a lawn party here next week to celebrate my coming out as a farmer? I shan't give it out publicly, of course, but I'm willing for you and my household to know it. Otherwise Miss Breck might think it was in her honor and begin to put on airs. Will you come and help entertain the countryside? You'll be a drawing card, Major, particularly with that pretty widow who lives on Maple Avenue."

"You and your parties," grumbled the Major, though he could not control a chuckle, and his hand stole to adjust his cravat. "Parties at this time. You'll be inviting me to a party in a lunatic asylum next. Oh, I'll come. I'll have to come to see that you behave yourself. Miss Breck, did you put him up to this, or is it his own idea? I declare I don't know whether I won't refuse after all, Alan, it's a fantastic notion," he was serious enough now. "Lone men like you and me ought to give stag parties, not entertainments where women are to be."

"There will be a lovely woman to help enliven the occasion," Hoyt again broke in on his tirade. "I've had a letter from Mrs. Manuelo and she has persuaded the Señor to put off their visit to his home for another fortnight. She will be in New York next week and wants to pay us a short visit before they leave for

South America. She has set Wednesday for their arrival in New York and, as their steamer does not sail until the next Monday, I thought she might have gotten together enough new clothes in the metropolitan shops to be presentable at a simple assembly here on Saturday."

"The snip coming back to flaunt herself before us?" cried the Major, in disgust.

"Claire coming back?" echoed Carol.

They all three laughed. It was so like Claire, not to be able to deny herself the delight of showing off as the wealthy Mrs. Emanuel Manuelo, the richest woman in the Melos district.

"Let her come!" cried the Major. "We'll be ready for her though Saturday is only four days off. Alan, my boy, we'll have a real party. She shan't dazzle us too much. Miss Breck, I'm an old man, old enough to be your grandfather, and I can behave like a grandfather to you. You're going into town to-morrow with me and get a frock to suit me. The whole outfit, mind you. No, you needn't make a fuss. I'm used to being obeyed. Now, let's get some paper and make up the lists. Clear away these dishes, Alph. We must have plenty of room."

"One thing I'm bent on," remarked Mr. Hoyt with a twinkle. "If there's no objection from our young lady here, I'm going to wire my nephew that he's expected here on that date on most important business. We'll need a strong young man to help entertain the Manuelos."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MAJOR TAKES CHARGE

"SEE here, I'm going to take charge, and I want no fuss about it," said the Major as he and Carol walked out of the elevator towards the ornate door of Madame Celeste's select establishment. "I've asked you to come out with me to-day with the understanding that I'm your grandfather with the privileges of a grandfather. I'm out to beat that snip at her own game, understand, and I must have my way. Hoyt agrees, so it's all settled. I'll call you by your first name, too. Grandfathers always do, I believe."

He was equally brisk with Madame Celeste.

"Let us see some of your prettiest ones, the sort that are right for evening or for an afternoon party," he said. "Don't send out any blondes, though. The colors won't look the same on this young lady. Send dark-haired girls, if you have them."

Madame Celeste smiled indulgently. "We have many brunette models," she assured him. "If you will suggest some colors . . ."

The Major looked at Carol who was ushered to the gilt settee opposite to his great carved armchair. "What's your favorite color, Carol?" he asked. "I don't remember what you wear most; it's blue, isn't it?"

Carol laughed happily. This was like a fairy tale. "I've worn blue till I'm sick of it," she confessed. "I don't care what color you choose, so it isn't blue. Almost any color is lovely if it's made up in the right way." She added as Madame Celeste withdrew, "I do hope you won't think of getting it here. This is a terrifically expensive shop." She thought perhaps the Major was not posted on these exclusive shops.

He chuckled as he looked about with appreciation of the costly furnishings, the artistic lighting, and the soft oriental rugs that deadened the sound of high heels as the models passed and repassed. A fat woman over on the other side of the salon was looking at a handsome pale pink spangled gown shown by a mincing blonde, and he drew Carol's attention to her.

"She'll be surprised when she sees a frock like that on herself," he commented. "She ought to see her dresses on a two-hundred pounder like herself. You'd look fine in that grapey stuff, like the one she's tossed on the table."

"That's a frightfully high-priced dress, I'm sure," she persisted. "Much too expensive for ——"

"I'll ask her to bring out some of that color," the Major broke in. He was determined, it seemed, to rush into mad extravagance.

Carol gave up. She had done her best. She washed her hands of folly. Now she would enjoy whatever came. If the Major found the price as stiff as she knew it would be, she would help him out of it, by those means that women often employ. . . . "It's very nice, but I want another sort of material, and I am tired just now. Another day." That was the way they did it. She hated to hedge like that: she'd rather tell the truth. Men were queer, though, it humiliated them to say the price was more than they wanted to pay.

"Here they come."

The Major, who had sat silent while Carol was planning a first-aid to his pocket-book, sat up and adjusted his glasses. He had to look over them, since they were reading-glasses, and it gave him a stern judicial look.

The first slender black-haired girl wore a scarlet creation which, as the Major said, almost knocked the eyes out of him. Carol was thankful he did not care for it. It would be hard to feel grateful for a conflagration like that. . . . The second girl was all in pale green with slippers and hat to match. Carol liked her much better, though she was not eager about the outfit. It was rather too extreme.

"That's not bad," remarked the Major, to Madame Celeste. "I don't want the hat, though. You may throw a hat in, of course," he added on second thought. "But I want some dew-dab, some tiara or head-band or whatever you call it, to go with the frock. She won't wear a hat at the party."

"No?" inquired Madame, amazed yet respectful. "Not a hat? It is an out-of-door party, is it not? And no hat? All wear hats. Not one is without a hat at such a gathering."

"I know all about that," the Major replied testily. "One sheep baas and the others join it. It's a silly fashion and this young lady isn't going to follow it.

No hostess should wear a hat at her own party. It's amazing, it's preposterous, I tell you, to deck herself out as if she were a stranger to her own household! If you insist on a hat, Madame, we'll say good morning at once ——"

"Oh, m'sieu, pray do not misunderstand," the proprietor was grieved at the accusation. "I merely mentioned the prevailing custom. I do not make the custom. I am happy to show all that I have. If you do not care to purchase a hat here, it is quite well." She left them for a moment and returned with a smile. "This is a charming robe, mademoiselle. Pray sit down and watch the model. Turn around, please, Thérese. The back, m'sieu, do you like it? It is very *chic.*"

Carol adored the lovely grapey chiffon embroidered in the same soft color, she liked the way it hung and floated about the wearer, she thought the hem-line just right and the shape of the neck not to be improved on. The hat, too, with its transparent drooping rim, was a dream. The slippers and embroidered stockings gave her a delicious feeling, and the pale fluffy summer fur scarf was the crowning touch of perfect taste. She simply couldn't utter a word.

"That's something like a costume," the Major pronounced. "Do you like that, Carol?"

"Like it?" breathed Carol. "It's heavenly. But ——"

"Can she try it on at once?" the Major turned to Madame. "The whole outfit, I mean. You'll have to hunt up a head-band, you know. I must see her in the head-band first. The hat will do for other occasions, to be sure. I must see her first in the head-band, though. Before we make up our minds to get the frock."

Madame smiled indulgently. It was all one to her about the hat. She had some extremely attractive hair ornaments that were suitable. She was sure the gown would fit the young lady, who was about the size of Thérese.

Carol followed her to the dressing-room door where Madame left her in the hands of a deft young woman, who proceeded to dress her in an entire silk vesture of a paler shade of delicate grape-color. Madame came with a band of flexible silver that she bound about Carol's dark locks. The two women examined her critically, adjusting a fold or putting a pin in where the garment was too loose.

"There," said Madame. "You are quite ready to show the gentleman. Take the fur, please."

Carol allowed the fur to be adjusted about her shoulders, though she was determined not to allow it to remain there when she came into sight of the Major; there was a limit to everything.

He was sitting where she had left him and his eyes lighted as she walked down the strip of velvet carpet towards him. He did not seem to notice that she had dropped the fur on a small side chair as she entered the main salon.

"By Jove!" he cried. "By Jove, you're a beauty! I knew I was right about that frock."

He made her walk back and forth before him, while he gloated over his success. He was not at all backward in appreciation of his own good taste. Neither was he so easily duped as Carol had supposed. He asked for the fur, to Madame's satisfaction.

"Look at yourself," he commanded as Carol stood before him. "Go over to that mirror and tell me honestly if you don't think you'll cut as good a figure at the party as that snip, with all her New York shopping. I want to be sure about it."

Carol obeyed. She saw a slender perfectly appointed figure look back at her with lovely earnest eyes, a seriously smiling mouth and intelligent white forehead from which every pucker of perplexity had vanished. She stared at the unfamiliar picture with delight.

"Why, I'm perfectly wonderful!" she cried, from the bottom of her heart. "They'll never recognize me."

The Major laughed out loud. Even Madame Celeste smiled a little more broadly than was customary with her. Perhaps her enjoyment was partly due to the fact that the modest little silver band that was so becoming to mademoiselle was one of the most expensive of her collection of costume accessories.

"Can you send them out at once?" The Major had his check-book in his hand, before Carol had recovered from her shock of happy surprise at the sight of herself in the new clothes. "We'll take everything, slippers, wrist-bag and all. How much will it come to?"

"With the head-band and under-things and the fur and the hat," Madame gestured to the attendant to take charge of Carol while she attended to a more congenial task. " It will be—I wonder if you would not like a wrap, a simple light wrap? It is difficult to use one's ordinary coats or wraps with this color, and I have a pale grey one that was made expressly. I should have mentioned it."

The Major was not at all averse to the wrap. Indeed he asked if there were not gloves of the same shade to go with it and added two pairs to his purchases. Carol felt absolutely giddy as she finally went to take off the dress and accessories.

When she came out in her modest blue linen all the business had been settled and Madame was assuring her customer that his granddaughter was a pleasure to fit. She had the air, she vowed. She hoped she might have the pleasure again.

"And now, where shall we go for lunch? " said the Major as they came out on Walnut Street. " We might go to the League or the Art Club—no, I'll give you something livelier. We'll go into the Astoria. There's dancing there, and perhaps you won't mind taking a turn with your grandfather. I can still manage to totter about. In the Army, you know, we have to keep in practice."

When they were seated, and they had planned their luncheon with a good deal of lively argument—Carol felt entirely at home with him now—he suddenly leaned back and shook his finger at her.

" There is just one more thing to do," he said. " You've got to send a night-letter this very night to that nice Alice of yours and tell her that it's not the style to wear hats at this party we're giving. Those two girls are going to be part of the family, I tell you. They're not to wear hats."

Carol laughed. "Perhaps Mr. Hoyt might like them to," she suggested with a twinkle of mischief. "It's his party, isn't it? He may like hats."

"Hoyt's got good taste," the Major affirmed. "He won't be too sorry to show that snip that there are prettier girls in our family now than when she was peacocking about The Hermitage. Where's that waiter? Isn't he ever coming for our order? How about a turn or so while we wait? Now that I'm your grandfather, I suppose I may say that you've got a tail of hair sticking out behind your ear. There, that's better. Now ——"

Carol found him a good dancer and she would have liked to take another turn but he stopped as he saw their waiter approach the table they had deserted.

"That's enough," he declared. "I'm too old to hop about long. Did I tell you," he added as they seated themselves, "that I had a chat with Henderson this morning? He tells me that precious pair have actually been shipped off to Chicago. They tried to drag in that cousin of Mrs. Claire's that you said was out with her that night but he had established his alibi long ago, when he was at the police-station over there in New York. Had a number of people who'd seen him, hotel-proprietor and a lot of waiters where he and that snip had been dining and dancing."

"I'm glad they didn't get him mixed up with all that mess," she said. "I feel sorry for him now. Of course, when he confessed that he'd been fooled by them, too, and when he told the police about the counterfeit money they gave him, it did look pretty bad for him."

"It narrows down to those two," he went on as he took up his fork. "That precious pair have a long score to settle with the law. Their right-hand man died just in time to escape spending the rest of his life in jail, but they won't be so fortunate. Think of two people with good brains and sound muscles wasting their gifts like that. It makes me sick."

"Mr. Hoyt says the District Attorney will prosecute on charge of counterfeiting United States money and that's the most serious offense, though the others are bad enough," she remarked, as she took a spoonful of sherbet. "There'll be a lot of cases against them. Mr. Harper will be called as a material witness in the Standing-cup case, he says. It gives me a chill to think of having to go through all that. I'm glad we don't have to be dragged off to Chicago as witnesses."

"That's one good side of Alan's mulishness, I'll admit," he returned. "It is better that you shouldn't be mixed up in it. I'm bound to say I'd like to testify against them."

"Isn't it strange that Mr. Carter hasn't turned up yet?" she asked idly. Her mind was turning to her lovely new possessions and she had an inclination to dismiss these serious problems that had weighed the past weeks. Pale grape-colored silks and laces, filmy hats and silver head-bands danced before her inner eye and she wanted to laugh for sheer delight.

"He's all right you may be sure," the Major declared. "He's where they can put their hands on him at any time, you may depend. He'll be called as a witness, of course. I'm hoping that we can find out where that Master spoon is, before the case is ended. A spoon like that doesn't vanish into thin air, no, my dear Carol. Wherever it is, someone has it who knows its value and who must have received it from those scoundrels—if one may call a female a scoundrel."

"Perhaps it'll never be found," she suggested.

He looked at her with a frown. "I'm going out to see a friend of mine in Chicago," he replied stiffly. "I may know more about the whole affair when I get back. Until then you'd be better employed getting ready for our party." He smiled suddenly. "We ought to invite Madame Celeste to let her see how well you three are going to look—without hats."

CHAPTER XXIV

PREPARATIONS

CAROL had never known days to go so fast.

Mrs. Biggs had said it would be impossible to give a large party in so short a time. " Folks will want to come, of course, but they'll have previous engagements," she had demurred when the scheme was presented to her. "And you ought to have the invitations out a week or more ahead. It isn't natural to expect to get a real nice big crowd on such short notice."

" You wait and see," Mr. Hoyt had challenged her. " We'll all pull together and we'll do it. In union is strength, you know."

That was the way it was done. They all devoted themselves to the work. The Major disappeared the next day after the shopping tour but he loaned his housekeeper and man, who more than made up for his absence. Fortunately it was holiday season for many people, and Mr. Hoyt's idea of employing four girls to write out his simple invitations and then to send a couple of men about in automobiles to deliver them personally made the first step possible. Once the invitations were out, the rest was not so difficult.

The entire household was kept busy, however, with the preparations. Biggs was continually dashing over to Doylestown to hurry the work on the pretty striped tent that was being made to serve as a base for the caterer's men, or to get a plasterer to come at once to put some pointing in the wall of the garden, or to take a fork to Lyons to match for another dozen. Mr. Hoyt had laid down an ultimatum that his own silver and china should be used and as each day brought in a response to the R.S.V.P. on the notes of invitation, he was continually revising his first modest orders for plates, cups or glasses.

"I believe that everybody who got an invitation is coming," said Carol as she held out the list with acceptances ticked off in red pencil. "It's going to be a tremendous party. I'm so glad, Mrs. Biggs, that you are going to take charge of the garden. So many people want to see it, and they'll ask all sorts of questions that no one else could answer."

Mrs. Biggs' small face flushed with gratification. "It's extremely nice of him; gentlemen aren't often as thoughtful as Mr. Alan is," she replied. "I know he asked me to do it because he wanted me to have a good time. I hadn't thought of mingling with the guests, I do assure you, Miss Breck."

"You're going to look sweet in that darling rose chiffon," Carol went on rather absently as she checked up the names. "The Major said he couldn't leave you out when new clothes were so popular, but wasn't it clever of him to get the right size? He's going into it heart and soul, isn't he? Two hundred people, Mrs. Biggs, and a lot to be heard from. We'll have plenty of room for them, though. The lawns and garden are big enough for twice that crowd."

" I trust it will be a good day," observed Mrs. Biggs, as she took up the pile of lace covers for the dressing-tables and dressers in the bedrooms upstairs. " You don't think that rose-color is a little too lively for me? " she paused to ask anxiously. " I wouldn't want to appear dressed too young."

" Too young! " echoed Carol in surprise. " Everybody wears colors this season, and you have a perfect complexion. Stuff and nonsense, as the Major would say. Better not let him hear you say that."

Mrs. Biggs appeared relieved but she still stood with the pile of lace-trimmed linen in her arms. " I wish," she began and seemed to hunt for words. " I hope you won't take offence, Miss Carol. Mr. Hoyt told me about the reward,—how you wouldn't hear to taking part of it from him. I—I—feel proud that you acted like that. People are so sort of greedy about money,—it makes you feel good when someone shows they aren't that way. The Major says you acted splendid about it."

" The Major is a fraud, Mrs. Biggs," said Carol earnestly. " He tells you that but he didn't tell you how much he spent on those heavenly clothes he bought for me,—did he? Well, you know, if you know anything about clothes, that he spent more than his share of the reward on them. Don't you see that he really gave me the reward, only in a different form? He was so kind about it, too, that I simply couldn't refuse."

Mrs. Biggs smiled. " I guess it wasn't all wasted money as far as he looks at it," she remarked wisely.

"It's more fun for him to see you cut out that Miss Claire,—Mrs. Manuelo, than if he'd handed it over to you to do what you pleased with. I wonder if she ever thinks about that poor young man Mr. Carter that she must have played her tricks on, or he wouldn't have written such a nice letter as you and Mr. Hoyt spoke of,—asking her to marry him and all. I hope the police never take him up again. I hope he'll go off to Canada and get a good job, like he said."

Carol laughed as she folded her long list. "You're just as romantic as ever, Mrs. Biggs," she said. "Those two aren't like you and Alpheus were, though. They are a different sort. When is the Major coming back? Did Mr. Hoyt tell you?"

Mrs. Biggs shook her head. "A couple or three days, he said. It's sure he'll be here in good time. He ain't one to be late for a previous engagement. He'll be here, on the dot, as you may say."

As she went off with her pile of linens, Carol stabbed the list on the file and took the cover from her typewriter. She was about to begin some work that had been left from yesterday's interrupted routine.

The sound of the wheel-chair came nearer and she paused. Mr. Hoyt had been saving himself as much as possible in this interval before the garden party and had taken to his chair again whenever he could. He meant to be fresh for Saturday, when he would have to be on his feet for hours, perhaps.

"I've had a 'phone from the Major," he said as he came into the study. "He says he's asked a couple of men he met in Chicago. Will you copy out that two-page article I wrote last night? You can make out the writing, I think. It will save time. I don't feel like dictation this morning."

She took the papers and laid them on the table beside the pile of typing paper. An envelope with a torn end reminded her of something she wanted to tell him.

"I've had such good news," she said, happily. "A letter from Mother. She says Father is quite well and that they are coming home a whole month before they expected. They'll be here about the eighth of September. Isn't it fine?"

He was hearty in his congratulations. "Won't you tell them when you write that I am sincerely delighted?" he said, earnestly. "Shall you stop with them until you go back to college? I hope not, for your house, as I recall, is some distance from here and it would mean a long trip each day. Or did you tell me that the house was rented for the season?"

"Until November," she nodded. "Mother wants me to look up a small apartment for them until then, somewhere out towards Jenkintown, so we can see each other often. They don't expect me to be with them, you see." She did not want to say that she could save more money while staying at The Hermitage than if she had to spend car-fare daily.

"Apartments are not easily found for so short a period," he remarked thoughtfully. He looked at her as if weighing something and then said unexpectedly, "Why not ask them to come here? They might find something to suit them in a few days or perhaps in a fortnight; meanwhile we could enjoy family life. I'm about as capable of hard work as your father is and we would be company for each other."

"It would be perfectly gorgeous," she cried and she sprang up to go pour out her pleasure to him where he sat. Suddenly she paused and her face lost some of its brightness. "You aren't just asking them because you want to pay me,—as part of the reward you wanted me to take? I couldn't ——"

"Don't be a goose," he said shortly. "I want them. I'd like to have a man of my own age and kind in the house for a while,—one who couldn't do twice as much as I can, one who'd have to go slow for a while. You and your mother wouldn't object if I monopolized him a bit?"

He was smiling at her again as he saw her delight. "Sit down and write at once," he said. "Here, give me that pad. I'll write a note to your mother to be enclosed. We'll put a special on it. Biggs has just come in but he can go again. There isn't any time to lose."

The Major when he came over later was much pleased with the prospect. He was getting a bit lonely over in his bachelor nest and was inclined to send an invitation of his own to Mr. and Mrs. Breck. Carol felt rather thankful, however, that Mr. Hoyt had been the first to think of it. "He's ever so kind," she thought, as she went out to meet Biggs with the mail. "But he is used to going about as he likes. Even Señor Manuelo was too much for him. I wonder if he isn't going to tell us about his trip to Chicago, though."

She found a letter from Alice which she carried back to the terrace where they sat. The Major wanted to hear what was in it and made no bones about it.

"You'd better read it yourself,—it's in her latest style," Carol laughed and she held out the sheet.

He shook his head. "No, thank you, I've no taste for those fiddle-faddles," he retorted crisply. "Let's hear what she says. I've got a word or two on my chest, myself."

Carol read slowly, punctuating for herself.

> "dear sherlocka we are set to arrive on the exact second pray thank that thoughtful and astute employer of female labor the hoyt for asking us en masse as it were beefyof course is a free woman but the undersigned has arranged for a sub for the week i begin my vacation that much sooner because of this event please wire at bs expense what color your garments will be we dont want to duplicate harmony above all is our motto until then—and perhaps afterwardtoo i remain respectfully alice whelen
>
> p s luckily b is rotten with riches i shall do my utmost for the dear girl"

The Major chuckled and rubbed his hands together. "That's right. That's right," he exclaimed. "We'll have a flock of birds of paradise that'll make that snip think she's not the whole thing."

He grew grave after that and told them of his visit to Chicago. He had been with a friend of his, a judge who had given him a good deal of information and allowed him to hear the records that had been taken at the time of Turner's confession.

"You've read in the papers, of course, how the police found the counterfeiting outfit in the room the Turner fellow had rented from a very respectable family," he said. "Under the floor in the closet. The tools he used for his silver-smith work were in a hole in the wall, neatly plastered up and colored to match the rest of the wall. There was a picture of a nice clean snow-scene over it, and Mrs. Cloud, the old lady who owned the house, said that Turner had often told her that he loved to look at that picture because it reminded him of the place he intended to buy over in New Hampshire, when he had saved enough to buy his farm equipment and be a real dirt farmer."

"The wretch," murmured Carol under her breath.

"Yes, we read about the tools being found," Hoyt remarked with a tinge of impatience in his voice. "And about the jewels and bonds and all that. What I want to know is, did you get any information about the spoon?"

The Major opened his eyes. "I thought you'd dropped that subject," he returned, and then quickly added more seriously, "I certainly did, my dear boy. I went out to the sanatorium where Turner was placed after his confession and had a private—an extremely private chat with him. He's an intelligent fellow. Knows a lot about old silver . . . but he told me at once, after my friend had told him my name, all that I wanted to know."

"Good!" cried Hoyt with his eyes alight. "Go on. Go on."

The Major was concise but not to be hurried. "The night they stole the fan and spoons he was on the job alone. He came in the house early in the afternoon and was hiding in the study when Carol ran up for the calendar-slip with the combination of the safe on it. He had taken the slip just at that very moment and he skipped up to the third floor until night. He let himself out of the third-floor window onto your balcony late at night, Carol, and peeped in, hoping to get through without detection. He was on the roof of the balcony when you were out there looking for the face that had alarmed you."

"How dreadful!" cried Carol, turning cold at the thought.

"He got the goods after Mrs. Biggs had gone back to bed, and finally slipped off with them without detection. He had been down once before to reconnoiter. The tower window-sill, he said, might have betrayed him then if he had not gone back and dusted it clean of his marks. That was two days before the real robbery."

"What about the spoon ——" began Hoyt but was silenced by a wave of the hand.

"They sent Parsons off with half a dozen of the spoons the next day, and at the same time they put the fan in Longman's for sale. They kept the other seven spoons—with the Master spoon—to be worked over and disposed of at intervals. Then, a week later, this man Shorty, who's just died, came down with

Turner to stage a spectacular robbery that would place the loss of the spoons and fan at a date a whole week later than the fan was given to Longman's ——"

"An alibi," interrupted Hoyt, astonished. "Clever but what a risk!"

"They're used to risks in their game," the Major replied, coolly. "They didn't mean to do any real harm, merely to muss up things in the study a bit and then make off to another place they were going to investigate. Turner said it would have been all right if his man hadn't dropped the jimmy he was carrying as they climbed up the trellis to the balcony at your window, Alan. That brought you downstairs and when you got that fall, he thought you'd seen them and that you'd been killed. Can you beat that story? And it's true."

"The fan was put in Longman's the next morning, you say," Hoyt spoke slowly. "How did it happen that the red robe had been changed to a blue one overnight?"

"Turner stayed up all night to doctor it up, he told me. I must say he did a good job. Then they were going to skip for France, when Carol set me on their trail. They thought they had arranged so that no suspicion would be fastened on them. They had young Carter hanging about to be the goat, you see. It was their scheme at first to take him in with them. But he was too stupid or too honest, so, after they'd threatened sufficiently, they fired him."

He turned to Hoyt with the long deferred answer to his question. "What became of the Master spoon?

It disappeared while they were making their rush for freedom," he said in a lower tone. "The woman accuses Turner of taking it and he thinks she has got it hid, but the fact remains that it has been found on neither of them nor in any of their hiding-places. It's a mystery that we may never solve. Turner, since he turned state's evidence, has made a clean slate of everything, hoping for leniency, and he swears he has no idea of what has become of that spoon."

Hoyt sighed as he leaned back in his chair.

"We'll never see that spoon again," he said with conviction. "It's been disposed of, you may be sure. It's a small item among such a long list of valuables as the Princess has to account for. Yet it is a great loss, a great loss."

"Well, I'm glad you've got the other twelve safe in the vault of your bank," declared the Major. "That's where they ought to have been at first. I guess you'd better junk that safe, Alan. You're not the sort to keep a safe around the house."

Hoyt laughed wryly. "I'll use an old sock, if I ever keep any valuables here again," he said. "You're right, Major. I'm not a real business man. And now," he added in another tone, "we'll drop this matter for a more lively topic. I had word from Alan Morse that he'll be here for the party but he'll be late, I'm afraid. I hope Mrs. Manuelo isn't in a hurry to leave that afternoon, it would be a pity for him to miss her—after his travelling all the way from Maine to meet her."

The Major chuckled. "Trust her to stop over-night, if she knows a good-looking man is to drop in," he said, with a nod to Carol. "We'll have to try to ship her off before dark, won't we? He isn't coming to see her, anyway, as you know, Alan. He's coming to draw plans for our irrigation scheme for the farms, Carol, and he's promised to stay a couple of days. I know that much, even if this wily chap does try to hoodwink you into believing otherwise."

Carol felt a thrill of interest. "That'll be fine," she exclaimed without reserve. "I hope nothing happens to keep him away. He looks so awfully nice in that picture . . ."

CHAPTER XXV

THE GARDEN PARTY

THE great day arrived in a glory of golden sunshine and with a cool breeze that gave zest to the event. Everything had gone smoothly from the first hour of the morning until now. Carol looked about her with a glow in her heart. "It's simply perfect," she thought. "There isn't a thing I'd want to be different."

Her mind flashed back to her first simple little party at The Hermitage, the birthday supper on the terrace, and she smiled happily. Surely she had been fortunate in her life here, had found real friends and inspiration for her work. She looked around again on lawn and garden with the tall trees and the solid tower and thought, "Yes, it *is* simply perfect."

The garden party was in full swing.

The small stringed orchestra was calling out a chorus of bird-songs from the maples and elms, and the caterer's men were dashing in and out of the striped tent with trays of salad, ices, and all the rest of the good things that are in demand on such occasions. Mrs. Biggs in her rose-colored chiffon frock had been explaining her methods of rose-culture to interested audiences for the last hour: her husband in a grey suit that matched her splendor, had been taking visitors to the top of the tower where he pointed out the places of interest on the landscape,—the County Home, the town beyond, with its spires and towers. Everybody was occupied and everybody seemed happy.

Beatrice Harriet Harford stood beside Mr. Hoyt on the large rug where the receiving party welcomed the guests and she looked at him with calm approval.

"I thought Carol was laying it on too thick when she told us about how nice you were," she remarked candidly. "I can see, though, that she was telling the bald truth. Who is that coming up the lawn? She's got a skinny man in white spats with her. See, the one in blue. Jiminy, she's a regular sunburst, isn't she?"

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she crimsoned with shame. If Alice or Carol could hear her talking that way to Mr. Hoyt, they'd be mad as hops. Alice had told her that he was a sort of grand person, and she'd promised to watch her speech. That Mr. Hoyt appeared not to have heard her, made no difference to her.

"He's too polite to let on," she thought, remorsefully. "I hope I'll have sense enough to keep quiet for a while now."

Mr. Hoyt's eyes were on the approaching figure, a slim girl in turquoise-blue and gold, who seemed to have forgotten the dignified dark gentleman who followed her: and Beefy pinned her own hazel gaze on the same party.

The turquoise-and-gold girl came up to the group on the large rug with a gliding swanlike movement that was grace itself. It was remarkable how entirely she had discarded her former quick light step. She halted at the sight of Carol and Alice, with the Major beside them.

"Ah, *caro mio!*" she cried in languid surprise. "It is you! I did not recognize you. But you are *ravissant* in that color. A dream."

"Golly, I bet that's——" began Beefy, startled out of her good resolutions, but this time Mr. Hoyt really had not heard her. He had begun to move across the few yards that separated him from the others. Beefy watched the little group with shrewd eyes.

Carol, in her grapey draperies, with the silver band on her black hair, smiled at Mrs. Manuelo with all her lovely face alight. She was undeniably the more attractive of the two. "It isn't that she's got better features," Beefy thought. "It's because she is, well, beautiful *inside.* She makes that other girl look like a chromo,—I mean, she appears so infinitely superior that the other girl shows plainly she has lived on a lower plane, spiritually, physically and intellectually. There, that's a good one. I'll go over and work it off on Mr. Hoyt when he's through with those two. I hope Alice hears me say it."

She joined the group, not in the least aware that she was part of the exhibit the Major had spent thought and money to have in readiness for Mrs. Manuelo. She knew she looked nice but she wasn't in the habit of thinking about herself when there was anything going on.

Claire took it all in—the harmony of Alice's nile-and-turquoise with both Carol's delicate bloom and Beefy's silver-and-grey confection—the latter of which had been selected by Alice and Miss Harford who was just then on her way home and delighted that her niece was to be one of the intimate circle at The Hermitage.

Claire thought, "What's happened? They look as if they'd got in ahead of me. That Alice Whelen's dress is not new but it has the touch. The brown girl's outfit is a knock-out and as for Carol,—she's going into the movies, I believe. No ordinary girl can look like that on the money she's got."

She felt comforted by the memory of how much money was beside her in the form of Señor Manuelo. He was a little stiff-necked about a few things and rather old-fashioned but he was very kind and he was the richest man that, just at this moment, her sea-blue eyes fell upon. The Major, that old crab, had plenty, of course, but he wasn't worth half that her Emanuel was.

"How charming it is, Nello *mio*," she remarked to him in a voice for all to hear. "Quite a picture, is it not? These quiet little affairs remote from the world are so refreshing."

Her Emanuel murmured some courteous response; he did not look at the picture, though he undoubtedly considered it quite as charming as she did: his dark soft eyes were fixed on a gentleman who had just come into sight.

"It is Dobrovsky!" he exclaimed. "He is here.

Ah, that is why he did not respond to my cable that we would visit him in his home. He must have left Vienna before my communication reached him."

Carol noticed that Mr. Hoyt was staring rather fixedly at the portly gentleman in formal clothes who was approaching. The Major bent near her ear. "M'sieu Dobrovsky," she whispered. "He must have run over to see those twelve spoons. He's an odd fish, you know."

Carol nodded. "That's why he didn't answer the letter," she answered in the same low tone. "Mr. Hoyt was wondering."

She liked the stout gentleman, in spite of his flowery compliments, for he was most undeniably flattering: he praised the day, the garden, the guests, the receiving party, the refreshments, in a lavish manner: yet Carol found him interesting, and listened, as best she could for Alice and Beefy, to the talk between the Austrian and the rest of the group.

"He has come to buy the spoons," she thought. "Oh, I hope that means he'll pay a large price for them, even if there are only twelve. I wish the Major wouldn't keep interrupting them. He wants them to wait a while. He has something on his mind. I wonder what he's going to do? He's calling out to them . . . oh, dear . . ."

The Major had stepped aside from the group for an instant and had returned with a pale, studious gentleman in most correct afternoon clothes. Carol thought she had seen him somewhere and as the Major announced his friend, she remembered; it was the face that had looked at her from the pages of the newspapers so often during the past weeks. It was Mr. Harper whose Standing Cup had been the talk of the courts.

The Major brought him straight to her.

"This is the young lady who discovered the 'Bologny,' Mr. Harper," he announced in a jocose fashion that surprised Carol. "I haven't told her that you intended to come to our party expressly to meet her, so I must explain that fact to her now."

Carol never knew how she got through the next few minutes when she was formally presented with the reward that Mr. Harper had offered for the capture of the thieves who had ruined his Standing Cup. She heard voices, knew that she responded with words that appeared to be suitable, and felt the envelope in her fingers but she could not realize that such fortune had befallen her.

She stared down at the check that Mr. Harper had just given into her hands. She could not believe the figures were real figures, one thousand dollars! It was incredible. There must be some mistake.

"But I didn't do anything," she protested, oblivious of the pressing throng that listened. "It was Mr. Henderson."

"Tut, tut, we went into that long ago, Mr. Harper and I," broke out the Major. "You recognized the Prin—I mean, Elizabeth Turner, known as Lady Liz, you picked up the jimmy, you identified the Turner fellow by his walk. The reward is yours. Let's have no more fiddle-faddle about it. Brace up, my dear Carol, and tell Mr. Harper what that check will do for you. Your college days will not have to be spent on that precious shop-py of yours ——"

It was Carol's turn to break in. "Indeed I shall go on with the Shop, it's a partnership, you know, and partnerships aren't so easily dissolved," she declared. "Mr. Harper, you don't want me to make a speech, do you? You know how grateful I am, don't you? I—I—just can't say anything. It's too terribly lovely . . ."

She didn't mind the laughter. She felt Alice's hand on her arm and heard her murmured words, "Good old pal, not to be corrupted by the power of gold. You won't need my little fortune now. We're awfully proud of you, angel child."

Claire stared at Carol who stood surrounded by a throng of enthusiastic guests, all bent on telling her how sincerely they congratulated her. It was not often that the captor of a notorious criminal was rewarded in such a happy manner on such a happy day.

"Well, of all the luck!" Claire thought. "I might have had that check myself if I had happened to be home that night and got on the track of them. She's fallen on her feet, and no mistake."

She signalled her husband with a motion of her golden head. "I think we'll have to go, darling," she said under her breath. "I am rather tired and we have to go back to New York. I'll go over to our car, while you see M'sieu Dobrovsky,—he may be going back soon, you know, and I'd like to see that palace of his in Vienna."

The Major did not have a chance to intercept them as they were leaving, although it was still a full hour before Alan Morse would arrive, and the two moved away towards the perfectly appointed grey limousine with a liveried chauffeur waiting near the stables. Mrs. Manuelo led her husband rather quickly, as if she wanted to escape from her suddenly developed boredom with this party at The Hermitage.

She did not look in the direction of the garden gate. She kept her head turned sedulously the other way. She did not want to see the young man who was coming in through the small gateway. "It's perfectly preposterous of him to turn up just at this time," she thought, angrily. "He might have had the decency to wait till the party was over. He looks a wreck. Manuelo is five times better looking than he is,—I wonder what I ever saw in him."

Carol saw the young man just as he emerged from the garden. She touched Mr. Hoyt on the sleeve.

"Mr. Carter is here," she said softly. "Over there in the gateway. He sees you. Look, he is coming here."

She felt a thrill creep up her spine. What strange errand had brought Richard Carter in his crumpled clothes and dusty shoes into the midst of this gay assembly? How changed he was, poor fellow! She hoped he was not going to make a scene before all these people. She was thankful Mrs. Manuelo had left.

Mr. Hoyt stood where he was and waited. A hush fell on those near by as the worn, dusty young man came up to the master of The Hermitage. Involuntarily they all lowered their voices and then studiously raised them in chat as he began to speak in a clear, resonant tone.

"Mr. Hoyt, I believe? Yes, I felt sure of it. I am Richard Carter. I have been away on a long chase. It ended happily. I have brought back something that belongs to you."

Mr. Hoyt seemed petrified. He stared at the small package that the young man held out to him but did not offer to take it. It was the Major who actually received the packet. He thrust it in Hoyt's hands and bade him open it.

"Don't you know what it is?" he cried in great excitement. "It's the spoon, the Master spoon. It can't be anything else. I know, for I had it wrapped up like that when I gave it to you for your birthday present. Open it, man. Open it!"

Carol saw Mr. Hoyt's long fingers unroll the tissue-paper and bring out the object from within, and she gave a low cry. "It *is* the Master spoon! And it has not been altered! It's just the same, I can tell by the way he looks at it. The thirteenth spoon at last!"

In the babel of talk and explanation that followed she heard kind words pass between the men who formed a little group around young Mr. Carter, who sat exhausted in a chair eating an ice that Beefy Harford had immediately brought him. She heard his story of the whole transaction between himself and the adventurers and of his pursuit of the spoon. She caught the name of the honest Johnny and of poor old Swayze, for Carter was not one who could restrain himself among friendly faces. She heard it all. It was like a window from which she looked out on a homely scene.

"He's a great deal nicer than he was when he was trotting around with Claire," she thought. "He's really good at heart, though he's awfully weak. Mercy, there's Beefy taking him a plateful of salad and stuff. He'll be swamped, if she keeps on feeding him like that."

She beckoned to Miss Harford and Beefy came quickly to her, with a pucker of concern on her candid brow. "What is it? Oh, you think he's had enough? Our men out on the ranch can stow away twice that much and have plenty of room for more, but I guess you're right. He's pretty weak, and flabby. I'd like to see him when he's in good shape, though. He's got the making of a fine strong man in him. He ought to be out on some ranch ——"

"You aren't branding him on sight, by any means?" inquired Alice who had joined them. "I thought your affections were entwined around the stalwart form of William Ransom, of the home town."

Carol laughed at the indignant face Beefy showed. "I'm not in the habit of branding strays, as you put it," she retorted witheringly. "And you know my engagement is going to be announced as soon as I go out home next week. I was just thinking that Father might help this poor boy to get on his feet."

Dr. Byrnes came up as the two girls moved away and he held out his hand to Carol. "It's pretty generous, I think, for me to come hunting you up to congratulate you on your good fortune; I had intended to ask you to take hold in my office, when Hoyt released you. Of course now that you are a rich lady, my hopes are a wreck. Hoyt tells me you've decided to go back when college opens——"

"Mr. Hoyt said that?" she broke in, surprised. "He didn't tell me that he meant to send me off like that. Are you sure, Dr. Byrnes?"

"Absolutely," returned Dr. Byrnes, seriously. "And I should advise you to accept his decision. You'll need all the time you can get for study and"—his eyes twinkled—"for practising salesmanship in that shop of yours that the Major has been telling me about."

Carol stood apart for a while, trying to realize all that the reward really meant to her, but she had not more than a minute to herself. Alice was coming to her across the grass. She noted as she went towards her chum that the group of gentlemen had dispersed among the guests and Richard Carter had disappeared. Alice told her that Mr. Hoyt had sent him indoors with Biggs to bathe and rest after his long tramp.

"This is a nice party, angel child," she remarked as she slipped a hand on Carol's arm. "I may say it's a thriller. I'm glad that young man Carter turned up just at the proper moment. The thing is like a play; it ends just as it should, eh, Beefy? Were you informed that Mr. Richard Carter is to have a good job in the benevolent Harper's offices, and that the errant taxi-driver Johnny Dice will nestle down here in The Hermitage truck-patch. My word, it's been better than the mind of maid could have conceived. It's too good to be true."

"But it is true," said Beefy in her practical way. "That's what makes it a thriller. I shouldn't get excited over it if we weren't in it and it wasn't true."

"Worthy Beefs," murmured Alice. "You speak like an ideal silent partner. Why don't you say something, *Carola mia,* as our friend *should* have said—did you notice she used the masculine gender? Speak out, O Carol, and let us share your thoughts."

"I was thinking how it has come out," she said simply. "The last has been the real climax. If the thirteenth spoon hadn't been found the best part would have been missing. It came, just at the right time: first, the fan, and then the six spoons, and then the other six, and now the Master spoon . . . the thirteenth spoon . . ."

Her eyes drifted from the colorful throng on lawns and garden-paths, past the old stone tower, past the outline of the town iridescent in the after-glow with its spires and tree-tops showing like some cloudy mansions of the sky. She saw across the far spaces two beloved figures drawing nearer every hour, a room with books and tiny anvil and some temple fans, she heard familiar voices . . .

"Come along and get some salad," Beefy's voice broke in on the dream. "I'm about starved. Mr. Hoyt is beckoning. Wake up, Carol. Golly, I never knew coffee could smell so good!"

"Wait a minute," exclaimed Alice. "Here comes another young man. Can it be our Carol's little playmate, Alan Hoyt Morse? Faith, it is. The Major is hauling him this way. You're in luck, Miss Breck, for he's a pippin among men and quite entirely lovely . . ."

THE END